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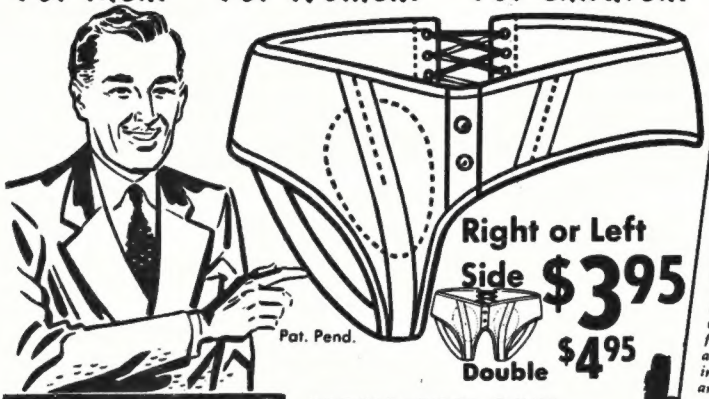

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 46, No. 3 MAY, 1952

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

SECRET OF DRY VALLEY.....Jackson Cole 12
Why would anyone want a waterless valley badly enough to kill for it? Ranger Hatfield aimed to find out—even if it cost him his right arm!

An Action Novelet

THE UNHOLY GRAIL.....Roe Richmond 62
Old Man Grail didn't need a renegade son to pull his chestnuts out of the range fire—or did he?

Short Stories

EL SOLDADO.....Gordon D. Shirreffs 54
Private Sepulveda puts up a battle against odds

WILLIAM AND THE CONTRACT BUCK.....Jim Kjelgaard 87
He was nobody's fool—till he met some slickers

WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN.....Jim O'Mara 91
Johnny Good-by fights to wipe out his outlaw past

RIDDLE OF THE WASTELANDS.....A. Leslie 102
There was no desert pathway for stolen cows, but—

Features

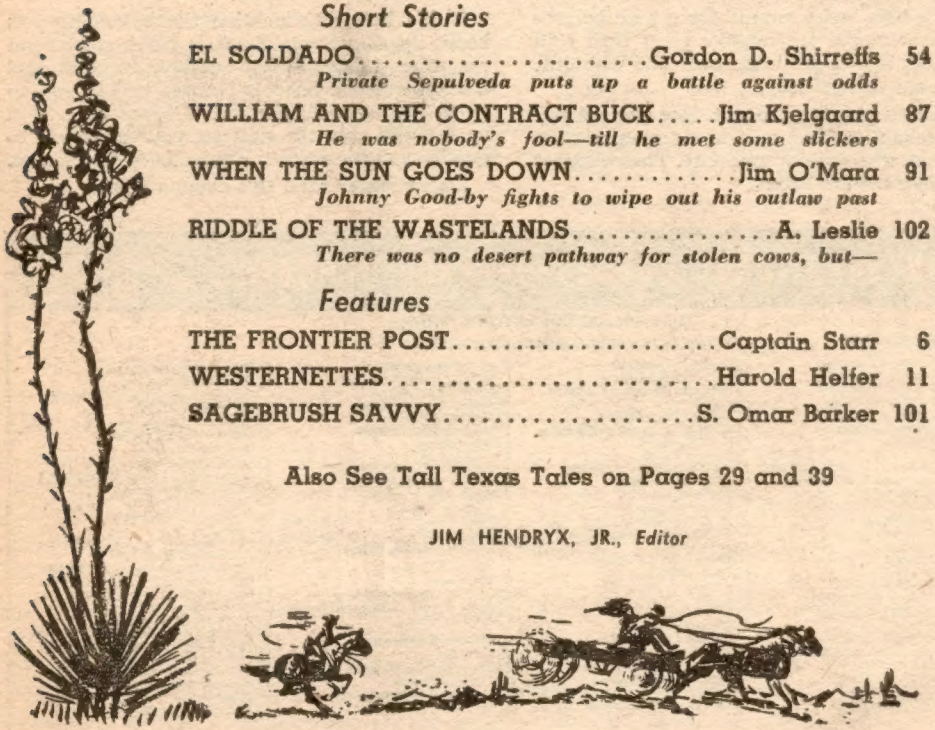
THE FRONTIER POST.....Captain Starr 6

WESTERNETTES.....Harold Helfer 11

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY.....S. Omar Barker 101

Also See Tall Texas Tales on Pages 29 and 39

JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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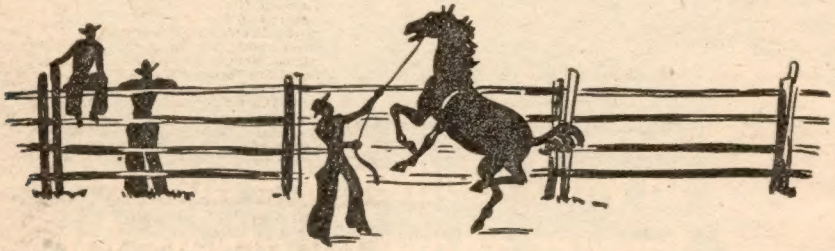
The FRONTIER POST

by CAPTAIN STARR

Old Blue, the Best There Was

NEXT time I read in the papers some dude scientist's claim that horses are stupid, I aim to tell him about Old Blue—the smartest cow pony that ever loped the Wyoming range. Any old-time Wyoming cowpoke will back me with fists, money or marbles on the unqualified statement that Old Blue packed more brains and savvy in his homely carcass than an scientist who ever peered through a microscope.

The wiry roan belonged to Senator Warren's 7XL outfit in southern Wyoming, but the whole State and every cowhand in it loved him and felt a keen proprietary interest in his clever exploits. And why not? Old Blue was not only as good a cutting horse as you'd find between the Rio Grande and the Peace River in Alberta, he remains today a warm and wonderful memory to every man who ever rode him in action or watched



him work his uncanny magic upon ornery cow brutes and equine rascals alike.

All Westerners know that a good cutting horse is the top aristocrat of any ranch remuda—the highly trained mount a cowboy rides when he wishes to cut a calf, colt or any other animal out of a bunch of its fellows.

Guided only by knee-signal plus unerring instinct, the sure-footed cutting horse turns and twists like a coyote trailing a rabbit while sticking burr-close to his agile quarry. He knows to the split-second when to start and when to stop, thereby leaving his rider free to concentrate on dropping his loop on the right critter. This takes flawless co-ordination, a perfect understanding between man and horse.

But where the ordinary cutting horse's education begins and ends with his skill at deft maneuvering, Old Blue's knowledge and ability extended far beyond such elementary accomplishments.

For example, the wise old-timer was more successful than the ranch bronc-buster at handling obstreperous colts. Whenever one of the cocky little devils balked at returning to the barn after romping gaily in the pasture all day, Old Blue arrived on the double to chastise the culprit. Blue's rider quickly roped the sassy rebel, and grinningly allowed the veteran cow pony to drag the fresh youngster back to his stall and shove him disdainfully inside.

Quiet Down—or Else!

Usually the humiliated colt would then stage a fiery display of temperament and try earnestly to kick his stall to bits. Disgusted with this idiotic juvenile behavior, Blue would go in alongside the plunging wise-guy,

pin him against the wall with his powerful shoulders and warn him to quiet down pronto —or else! The toughest colts melted fast when Old Blue looked 'em straight in the eye and told them in horse lingo to act decent or else he'd belt the bejingoes out of 'em.

Once in awhile a colt would sneak a kick at Blue when his back was turned—and then all hell broke loose in the stable! Ears flattened and squealing his rage, Old Blue grabbed the kicker with his teeth by the back of the neck and shook him dizzy.

One such stern lesson was plenty—no colt ever challenged teacher's authority a second time.

Old Blue was an invaluable instructor to all the green colts that were broken for driving. Hitched double to the breaking cart with some rambunctious husky, Blue would coolly hold him back when he felt like running away and busting his fool head against a fence. Or, if Mr. Smarty-pants tried to balk and get out of work by sulking, the old-timer would lunge into his collar and drag his stubborn pupil flying breathlessly along with him until the balky one decided to behave like a gentleman.

Sly Humor

With humans, the old cow pony displayed a sly and sometimes fiendish sense of humor. He enjoyed participating in a standing joke perpetrated on every new man arriving to work on the ranch.

First morning out, the new hand invariably drew Old Blue for his day's mount. The old fellow would stand meekly with his head drooping almost to his knees until the new man swung to the saddle. Then Blue would look around at him—and if you ever saw disgust plain on a horse's face, you saw it then!

After a deliberate and insolent appraisal, Blue would go to work and try his darndest to unload his rider. Try about half a dozen jumps, that is. If the new hand was still aboard after the sixth jarring sky hop, Blue knew doggone well he'd tackled a real bronc-twister and it was just no use bucking any more. He was never one to wear himself out, was Old Blue, when the cards weren't falling right for him. A heap sight smarter than most cowhands that way.

Yet once he got to know and like a new man, Blue was real careful not to hurt his

[*Turn page*]

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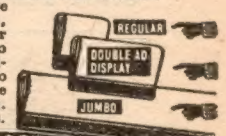

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feelings. Often a green hand was set to watering the whole remuda as a joke an hour or two after the regular wranglers had finished the job. Old Blue ambled along willingly to the creek for a second round. The foxy cuss pretended to drink deeply just so the new man wouldn't discover that he'd been tricked.

Or, come to think if it, maybe that was just Blue's cute way of stringing along with the joke. You couldn't be sure about that. Anyhow, Blue would stick his nose way down in the water and gurgle away, blowing

bubbles in a comical effort to prove that he really was awful thirsty.

A man could spin a hundred yarns about Old Blue, but somehow these are the little things that stick in an old cowpoke's memory.

All Wyoming was mighty sad when Blue cashed in his chips a few years back. The boys of the 7XL Ranch threw a regular funeral for him, with a real sermon and all the trimmings. They worked all one rainy morning in the bunkhouse fixing up a fine headboard for his grave and composing this inscription:

ERECTED TO THE MEMORY
—OF—
OLD BLUE

The Best old cow pony
That ever pulled on a rope
By the Cow Punchers
of the 7XL Outfit
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The Service Life Family Hospital Plan covers you and your family for about everything—for *every* accident, and for *all* common and rare diseases after the policy has been in force 30 days or more. Very serious disease such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart disease, diseases involving female organs, sickness resulting in a surgical operation, hernia, lumbago and sacroiliac conditions originating after the policy is in force six months are all covered . . . Hospitalization caused by attempted suicide, use of intoxicants or narcotics, insanity, and venereal disease is naturally excluded.

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Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

10 DAYS FREE EXAMINATION

You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and with policyholders in every state. SEND NO MONEY—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

REMEMBER—$100.00 A WEEK CASH BENEFIT IS ACTUALLY $14.25 PER DAY!

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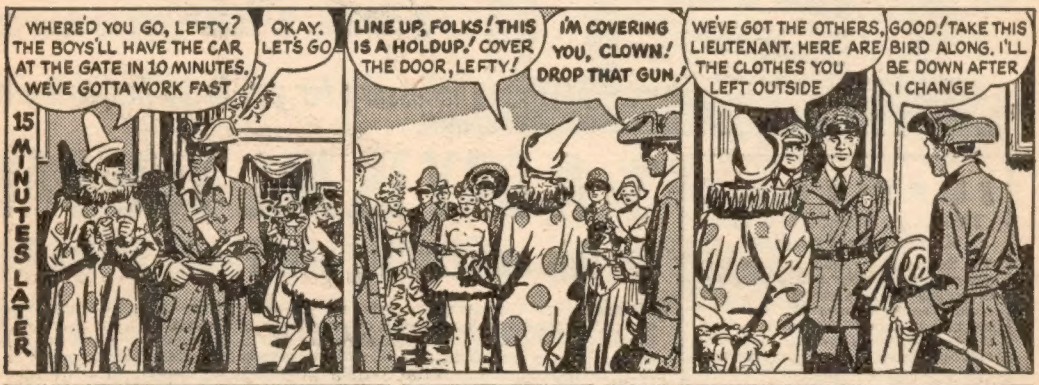
WHILE MOST OF THE GUESTS OF LORIMER DAVIES, WEALTHY MANUFACTURER, ARE ENJOYING HIS MASQUERADE PARTY, "CAPTAIN KIDD" SEEMS TO HAVE ENCOUNTERED TROUBLE...


15 MINUTES LATER
WHERE'D YOU GO, LEFTY? THE BOYS'LL HAVE THE CAR AT THE GATE IN 10 MINUTES. WE'VE GOTTA WORK FAST
OKAY. LET'S GO
LINE UP, FOLKS! THIS IS A HOLDUP! COVER THE DOOR, LEFTY!
I'M COVERING YOU, CLOWN! DROP THAT GUN!
WE'VE GOT THE OTHERS, LIEUTENANT. HERE ARE THE CLOTHES YOU LEFT OUTSIDE
GOOD! TAKE THIS BIRD ALONG. I'LL BE DOWN AFTER I CHANGE

BUT, DAD, HOW...?
LIEUTENANT ROGER'S STORY CAN WAIT 'TILL HE SHEDS THAT COSTUME. FOLLOW ME, "CAPTAIN KIDD"
HERE'S THE CURE FOR YOUR WHISKERS
THANKS, MR. DAVIES
WHAT A SWELL BLADE! TWO DAYS' STUBBLE GONE LIKE MAGIC!
THIN GILLETTES HAND OUT QUICK, EASY SHAVES EVERY TIME

I KNEW LEFTY WAS COMING AS "CAPTAIN KIDD", BUT I COULDN'T IDENTIFY HIS PAL, SO...
GREAT WORK!
JUST THE CHAP TO HEAD UP OUR ATOMIC SECURITY FORCE
M-M-M-HANDSOME

YOU ENJOY SMOOTHER, BETTER-LOOKING SHAVES AT A REAL SAVING WITH THIN GILLETTES. NO OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADE APPROACHES THEM FOR KEENNESS AND LONG LIFE. THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T"... PROTECT YOU FROM THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT 10-BLADE PACKAGE
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢
TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

It could only happen in Texas, of course, but a dog treed a fish there. It happened near Dallas after a flood. As the waters receded, a fish got stuck in the branches of a tree. A dog started barking at it and refused to be silenced until the fish was removed.

Ed Ryan, of South Dakota, who fought with General Custer (not at Little Bighorn) learned to read and write at the age of 70 and wrote his biography, "Me And The Black Hills," at the age of 94.

It is generally thought that more than half of the Indian population was killed off by the whites in settling the West. The best estimates, however, put it at no more than seven percent, and probably closer to six. Which means but a shade over one out of twenty were killed by white men.

The Grizzly Giant, a tree in Yosemite National Park, California, is 27.6 feet in diameter and is 209 feet tall. It is estimated to be more than 3000 years old, which means it was among the living way back 1000 years before Christ.

One of the most rugged of all water races occurs out West, near Thermopolis, Wyoming. The Wind River Canyon Boat Race is held each Memorial Day over a 12-mile stretch of jagged rocks and whirling rapids. Contestants can use "anything that floats" and can be propelled only by oars or poles.

What's-in-a-name department: Dr. Bilderback is a Houston, Texas, chiropractor.

The largest rolled-filled earth dam in the world, the excavation made for Garrison Dam at Bismarck, North Dakota, would make a hole a city block square and over four miles deep. The concrete used would fill 30,000 freight cars.

Cattle rustling reared its ugly head in, of all places, the Washington, D. C. vicinity. In sentencing three men to eight years each, Judge Charles W. Woodward declared: "The farmer can't sit out all night with a shotgun to protect his stock. He must be supported by strong sentences in the court."

When Texas was annexed by the United States, it retained the right to divide itself into five states. It didn't. Which accounts for the beautiful monstrosity it still is today —over 263 times the size of our smallest state, Rhode Island, though only about 8 times as great as the Island in population.

Armed with only a knife, it is said that Kit Carson once killed a savage mountain lion in hand-to-claw combat.

Jim Hatfield caught the man's wrist, spinning him around and off his feet

SECRET

Why would anyone want a waterless valley badly enough to kill for it? The famed Lone Wolf of the Rangers aimed to find out—even if it cost him his right arm

CHAPTER I

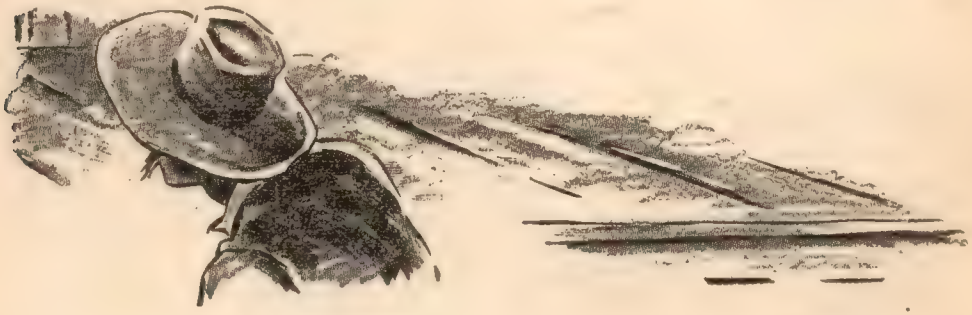
A Stranger Comes to Vanishing Wells

"THAT'S VANISHING WELLS," the garrulous stage driver said, pointing out the town ahead. He turned to the tall, lean man riding on the seat beside him. "Sure that's the place you're looking for?"

The tall man squinted his strange green eyes against the dust kicked up by the running horses. "That's the place." He nodded.

The driver spat tobacco juice over the near wheel. He was on the shady side of fifty, a long, leathery individual with a scraggly mustache that lent a touch of humorous kindness to a face scarred by the long years spent in sun and weather.

The tall, quiet man beside him disturbed the stage driver. He usually placed each of his passengers in a mental niche, tabulating them with the uncanny accuracy of a lifetime of keen judgment. But this man baffled him. He was dressed like some tenderfoot—black broadcloth suit, white shirt, string tie, polished boots. In a country where guns were prominent and often necessary articles of attire, this man wore none visible to the eye. He had not said a dozen words since leaving Coyote Springs the night before, but the gnarled driver would swear that those



# of DRY VALLEY

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

greenish eyes had missed nothing on the long trip. Nor did he seem to mind the dust, the heat and the jolting that so often brought cries of protest from the passengers inside.

Running effortlessly behind the coach to which he was tethered was a golden sorrel, which this stranger said he had bought in Coyote Springs. "Not much on riding," he had explained. "But I may have to do some once I get to Vanishing Wells, and this animal looks gentle."

The driver snorted at the remembrance. Neither the magnificent sorrel nor the man beside him struck him as being particularly gentle.

He worked his "chaw" back into his left cheek and grunted, "Ain't my business to give advice, stranger. But if you plan to stay in that sinkhole a spell, don't tread on Stoop Miller's toes. He's the deputy sheriff. Suspicionest man in five counties—and a fast man with a hogleg."

Jim Hatfield smiled. "I'll remember to keep on the right side of the law."

THE driver rattled on, "Miller's a straight lawman. But he's got more trouble than he can handle, I hear. There's been trouble brewing in this neck of the woods ever since King Hudson run Ryan Estes out of Bueno Padre. Estes came up here to Vanishing Wells and took over the Mikado Casino. Brung in some gals and spruced it up. Hired himself some tough gunnies like Deacon Seliars and Steve Gundar, just in case the King came riding up here with some of his Big Crown riders." The driver got rid of a mouthful of juice over the side. Miller's tough—but he's not big enough to handle this trouble. Not with the Deacon taking Estes' orders."

"I'm not looking for trouble," Hatfield disclaimed quietly. "I came to look up a friend of mine who settled around here. A man named Godfrey Brant."

"Brant!" The driver jerked the left lead animal aside to avoid a pothole in the road. "You mean the jasper who bought that Englishman's place in Mirage Valley? Spread known as Taylor's Folly?"

"That's the man," Hatfield agreed. "He's still here, isn't he?"

The driver shrugged. "Ain't heard different." He clamped his mouth over his chaw and kept his eyes on the road. Hatfield frowned slightly at the man's sudden change. Evidently Brant was a subject men avoided around here.

He eased back on the jolting seat and ran over in his mind what he knew of Godfrey Brant.

The man had been a Texas Ranger, working for Bill McDowell, Ranger Captain, until a bullet from a Border brush with outlaws crippled him. He had resigned and come north to run cattle.

Hatfield had never seen Brant, who had been one of McDowell's friends. So when McDowell had called Jim in and showed him Brant's letter asking for help, the name had meant nothing to him.

The note was short and to the point:

Bill—having a little trouble up here that I can't handle alone. Bought a spread that seemed worthless. But I've figured out a way to get water, and that seems to be the rub. Someone else has it figured out, too. Sent for my son, Jeff, but he's green to this kind of trouble, and anyway he may not get here for a while yet. Can you spare a good man? Tell him to keep under cover until I see him. If this thing pans out up here I'll be riding down to Austin one day to collect my bet. Hasta la vista.

Godfrey.

Bill McDowell had pushed back, grinning at the look on Hatfield's face. "I told Godfrey I'd eat my hat if he ever made a go of ranching. He was a restless cuss. I couldn't see him sticking to any one place long enough to make it work. Not that he was always itchy-footed. But when his wife died, leaving him with a five-year-old boy, it kinda knocked the wind from him. Rangering being the kind of hazardous business it is, he couldn't keep the boy with him, so he sent young Jeff to his sister back East."

"What's Godfrey like?" Hatfield asked.

"Middle height, chunky build. Riles fast and cools off quicker. If he's wrong he'll tell you—if he's right, look out! Should be crossing fifty, and even with his bad leg I'd say he can still ride farther,

work harder and cuss louder than any man twenty years younger." McDowell had looked at Hatfield, smiling gently. "If Godfrey's in trouble, I don't know of a better man to send him than you, Jim."

And that was what was bringing Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf, to Vanishing Wells.

HE WATCHED the cluster of shacks, dobes and jerry-built frame buildings loom up as the stage careened around the last bend in the road. The road widened and became the start of a dusty street flanked by weathered board awnings. The stage rolled at a clip, spraying dust against the grimy windows and scurrying pedestrians.

They turned west on Mesa Boulevard which was two blocks long and ended at Mirage Square. The town's most imposing structures faced on this square and Hatfield got a brief glimpse of a thin-faced, worried man coming to the door of the law office as the stage rolled past.

"Whoa!" the driver bellowed.

The coach swung in close to the boardwalk and came to a stop before a two-decker building with a board sign nailed above the door:

MIRAGE HOTEL

"Twenty minute stop!" the driver growled down to the passengers inside. "All out!"

Jim Hatfield stepped down, glad to stretch his long leg muscles. His bag was up on the luggage rack, with his saddle. His guns were inside his bag. Goldy snorted as he came around to the rear of the coach and began to untie him. The sorrel nuzzled his shoulder, whinnying softly, voicing his puzzlement at this unusual treatment of being riderless.

"Heading through, stranger?" a voice asked coldly.

The Lone Wolf turned to meet the stare of a tall, round-shouldered man with a deputy's star on his coat. The lawman had a narrow face seamed with worry lines, and the blackest eyes the Ranger had ever looked into. And the most suspicious.

JIM HATFIELD

"Not right away," Jim answered casually. "I plan to stay awhile."

"Business?" the lawman snapped.

"Maybe." Jim lifted his glance to take in a man who had stepped through the door of the Mikado Casino, flanking the hotel. This man came up to stand beside the deputy sheriff on the boardwalk, his eyes making a quick inventory of Goldy and Jim.

He was a good-looking man in a hard, polished way—about thirty, Hatfield judged, blond, and too well-dressed for a town like Vanishing Wells. He wore a carefully trimmed reddish brown mustache under a nose flattened at the bridge. His eyes were blue and cool, taking in much, revealing little. One last item, Jim noticed almost casually—he wore a shoulder gun under his coat.

The driver herded the passengers into the lobby before coming back to the coach. He stepped up on the iron footrest and hauled Hatfield's bag and saddle down, dropping them at the Ranger's feet. Then he came down, wiping his face with his neckerchief. He said, "Howdy, Miller." His eyes moved on to the man with the mustache. "Got a special delivery in the mail bag for you, Mr. Estes."

The well-dressed man nodded. "Thanks, Pop," he said, and watched the driver haul the mail bag down and go into the hotel with it.

Estes turned to Hatfield. "Nice looking animal you got there, stranger. Want to sell him?"

Hatfield shook his head.

The deputy was frowning. "What's your business in Vanishing Wells?" He had prematurely gray hair, this lawman, and a sour twist to his mouth. Stoop Miller, Hatfield guessed, expected trouble from every man who came to Vanishing Wells, and usually got it.

"I'm looking for Godfrey Brant's place," Hatfield answered truthfully.

Estes seemed to grow suddenly alert. "Brant? The man who bought the ranch known as Taylor's Folly out in Mirage Valley?"

IT WAS the second time Jim had heard Brant's place referred to by this strange title. "Guess that's the man." He made a small gesture with his shoulders. "I didn't realize how far from civilization this town was," he added, frowning. "I got off the train at Coyote Wells and they told me I would have to ride to Brant's place, as there would be no other means of transportation from Vanishing Wells. So I looked around for a saddle horse." He reached up to stroke Goldy's nose. "This animal looked good—but I may have got stuck, not knowing much about horseflesh."

The deputy snickered. "Stuck! For a man who knows nothing about horses you got a damn good instinct, fella."

The blond man was looking the golden sorrel over. Hatfield caught the gleam of avarice in his pale eyes. "Might go as high as a hundred and twenty-five for him," Estes said, feigning only a slight interest. "He's a fancy looker all right, but of course he hasn't got much bottom."

Hatfield kept his face straight. The man was a liar, and knew it—and he'd give ten times that price if he thought he could own Goldy.

"Well—" Jim shrugged doubtfully—"I might consider it, after I see Godfrey. Hope his place isn't too far from here. I'm not used to riding long distances."

The deputy sniffed at this. This tall, green-eyed man with the quiet voice struck him as a man who could ride to hell, rope the devil from his hot seat and drag him back without turning a hair.

The blond man said smoothly, "I'm Ryan Estes. I own the Casino here. Come to my office any time and I'll make it a cash deal."

Hatfield shrugged. "Maybe, after I get back from visiting Brant. I won't have any further use for the animal then.

Ryan Estes shrugged as though he were doing Hatfield a favor. "Suit yourself, stranger. By the way, what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't say," the Lone Wolf answered. He turned to the deputy who was grinning sourly. "If you'd be kind enough to point out the way, I want to ride to Mirage Valley."

The lawman nodded. "You don't strike me as a man who'd get lost easy. But just to humor you, I'll ride along with you. Ain't been up that way in months. Get yourself put up at the hotel, and I'll meet you in front of the livery stables yonder. In a half-hour, say."

CHAPTER II

King Hudson

HATFIELD WATCHED Stoop Miller swing down the walk to his office. Estes had gone back into the Casino. Goldy's nudging turned the Ranger around.

"Was kinda hoping to see Godfrey alone," he murmured, rubbing his palm over Goldy's nose. Goldy whinnied understandingly and Hatfield smiled. He saddled the sorrel and left him at the rack.

The stage passengers were grouped in the lobby. They stared at him as he went to the desk, registered, and went upstairs.

He found water in a pitcher and soap and towel. He washed the trail dust from his face and hands, glanced at the dark stubble sprouting along his hard jaw, but decided that shaving would have to wait. Opening his bag, he took his Colts and belts out and decided to wear them. The skirt of his black coat came down over the butts, hiding them from the casual glance. When he had loosened the bottom button of his coat he felt better as he went back downstairs.

The passengers were outside, getting ready to board the stage. A girl who was going on to Amarillo with her mother came up to him as he paused on the walk. "I wish you were coming with us," she said shyly. "Somehow Mother and I felt safer when you were along."

"You'll be in Bueno Padre before night," he reassured her. "And by then you'll be over the roughest part of your trip. You'll be all right."

He watched her board the coach. The driver swung up into the seat, gathered up his reins and swung the team around in a tight turn. His yell came back, riding the pall of dust his team kicked up.

The name of the girl who had spoken to Hatfield was Christine. That much the Lone Wolf knew of her—that much he had allowed himself. Long ago he had chosen his path, and women were not part of it. But he remembered her smile, her warm lips, as he stepped down from the boardwalk. That much he remembered, before putting them out of his thoughts.

He was getting ready to board Goldy and meet the deputy at the stables when a rider came pounding into the square. He was a big man with a hawk nose that dipped down into a mass of dusty black whiskers. He pulled his frothing-mouthed horse to a stop beside Goldy, jumped down, not even glancing at Hatfield and disappeared through the Casino's doors.

A moment later he and Estes appeared, coming out to the walk. The man who had ridden in was saying, "I counted nine riders, with King."

The Casino owner threw Hatfield a sharp, judging glance. There was no one else in the square at this moment.

"Run down to French Charlie's Joe," he ordered grimly. "Tell Steve Gundar and Lepage to get over here in a hurry." A harsh smile broke the polish of his groomed face. "If King Hudson's come for his showdown, we'll give it to him."

The man he'd called Joe nodded. He crossed the walk in three strides and found Hatfield partially blocking his way. He was a big man, used to shoving his weight around, and he reached out now with a hairy hand to push Jim Hatfield aside.

Hatfield caught the man's wrist, yanked forward, and spun the man around and off his feet. It was done quickly, effortlessly, and the heavy-set rider, handled like a baby, dropped off the boardwalk and then sat down hard in the trampled dust.

Hatfield teetered on his toes, looking down at the astonished man. "It isn't polite," he said gently, "to shove people out of your way."

The rider came to his feet with an oath. "Why, you long-handled tinhorn, I'll—"

He rushed Hatfield, both arms swinging. Jim stepped lightly back, ducked a sledge-hammer blow aimed at his face, leaned far sideward and let his foot remain in the other man's path. Joe tripped and ploughed head first through the glass front of the Casino.

"Tch, tch," the Lone Wolf said, shaking his head. He helped the dazed and bleeding man to his feet, away from the bits of glass spattering the walk. "You've got a bad temper, fellow. And you're some cut up. I'd advise you to go see a doctor."

"What in tarnation's going on here?" a voice rasped behind them. Stoop Miller came hurrying up, gun in hand. He stopped, glared at Hatfield. "I thought I told you to meet me at the livery stable! Who started this ruckus?"

Hatfield shrugged. "Ask Joe," he said quietly.

ESTES was watching the tall, green-eyed man, a queer light in his own pale eyes. "Reckon it was Joe's fault, Miller," he conceded to the lawman. "Joe was in a hurry and he tried to shove this pilgrim out of his way." He smiled bleakly at Jim. "For a tenderfoot you handle yourself mighty well."

Joe was swearing. He was bleeding from a half dozen small face cuts. "I'll break the damn fool's neck! I'll—"

"Shut up!" Estes snapped. "Get down to Frenchy's like I told you. And then go see the doc before you bleed to death. Move!"

Grumbling, Joe swung into saddle. The deputy sheriff eyed the Casino owner. "What's going on, Ryan? Who you sending Joe for? The Deacon?"

"The Deacon is out of town," Ryan answered smoothly. "But Joe just rode in with the news the King and a half-dozen Big Crown gunnies are on their way in to town. If he's coming primed for trouble, I want to be ready for him. I sent Joe for Steve and Lepage."

Miller swore. "Damn you, Ryan! I told you you're not running Vanishing Wells! You get Steve and Lepage back to their holes. I'll handle King Hudson."

Ryan laughed in his face. "The King's been making big talk, way off in Payoff Valley," he snapped. Every time he loses a cow, or one of his fences is cut, he blames me. Well, he's going to have to back his big mouth today. And to hell with you, Miller. Keep out of it!"

The deputy had guts, and in that moment Hatfield's hand went out to him. The lawman's face whitened, but he kept control of his temper. Instead he turned to Hatfield.

"Sorry," he said grimly. "Looks like I won't be able to ride with you. Take the left hand fork in the trail south of town and it'll lead you to Mirage Valley. You can't miss it."

Hatfield shrugged. "I'll find it, Miller."

He turned to mount Goldy. He couldn't linger without rousing the suspicion that was already sharpening in Estes' eyes. But the riders who suddenly turned down Mesa Boulevard took the thing out of his hands. There were nine of them, as Joe had said, and they rode down the short street abreast, filling the road, bringing a sudden flat and sullen violence into the drowsiness of Mirage Square.

King Hudson was a big man. Hatfield picked him out of that group of horsemen, without ever having met the cattleman. He rode a big cream stallion that was at least a couple of hands higher than any of the animals flanking it. He was a heavy-bodied man, fleshy but not soft, and he carried himself arrogantly, sure of his power and of himself. His face was a ruddy red which no amount of sun seemed to darken. He wore no weapon visible to the naked eye, but he carried an expensive, high-powered rifle in his saddle-boot.

The men siding him were serious-faced. Hatfield's experienced glance told him they were not hardcases, hired for their ability with shooting irons. They looked the usual run of cowhands, willing to work for their keep, ready to side in with their boss in any range quarrel. Loyal hands, perhaps—but not gunfighters.

They drew up to form a mounted semicircle about the three men on the walk. The King's eyes rested contemptuously on Estes, skidded over Miller's scowling face, and lingered on Hatfield. And for a moment his glance was disconcerted at the quiet measure of those level green eyes.

He leaned forward, big hands resting on his pommel. "Thought you'd be out here, Ryan." he said to Estes. He was a big man talking down to scum, the way he voiced it. "Saw one of your stooges on the trail while I was hightailing it into town."

Estes was smiling, but there was no humor in his face or in the tightness around his mouth. "You're way out of your stamping grounds, King," he sneered. "This isn't Bueno Padre. And what you have to say doesn't mean a thing here. Unless you're willing to back it with more than words."

King flushed. "I'll have my say. And

I'll back it if I have to." Anger roughened his voice. "I came here to tell you I got your stooge's message. And I told him to go to hell, like I'm telling you. You don't scare me with your threats, Ryan. And I don't blackmail."

RYAN ESTES shrugged contemptuously. "I don't know what you're talking about." He lifted his gaze past the Big Crown riders, and all of a sudden, a grin crinkled around his lips. "Nor do any of the boys behind you, King."

The King pivoted in his saddle.

A half-dozen men, all heavily armed, had come quietly down the street behind them. They spread out now, grimly, silently. Trapping those Big Crown riders in the square.

The leader was a raw-boned man, heavy across the chest, flat-waisted. For a big man he walked lightly, lithely; a restless man who had to keep moving. Several days' reddish stubble roughened his hard face, already disfigured by an old saber scar across the bridge of his nose.

He wore two guns, set high up at his waist, handles jutting inward. A cross-draw man and, Hatfield judged, either a fool or a man sure of his speed to rely on this type of draw.

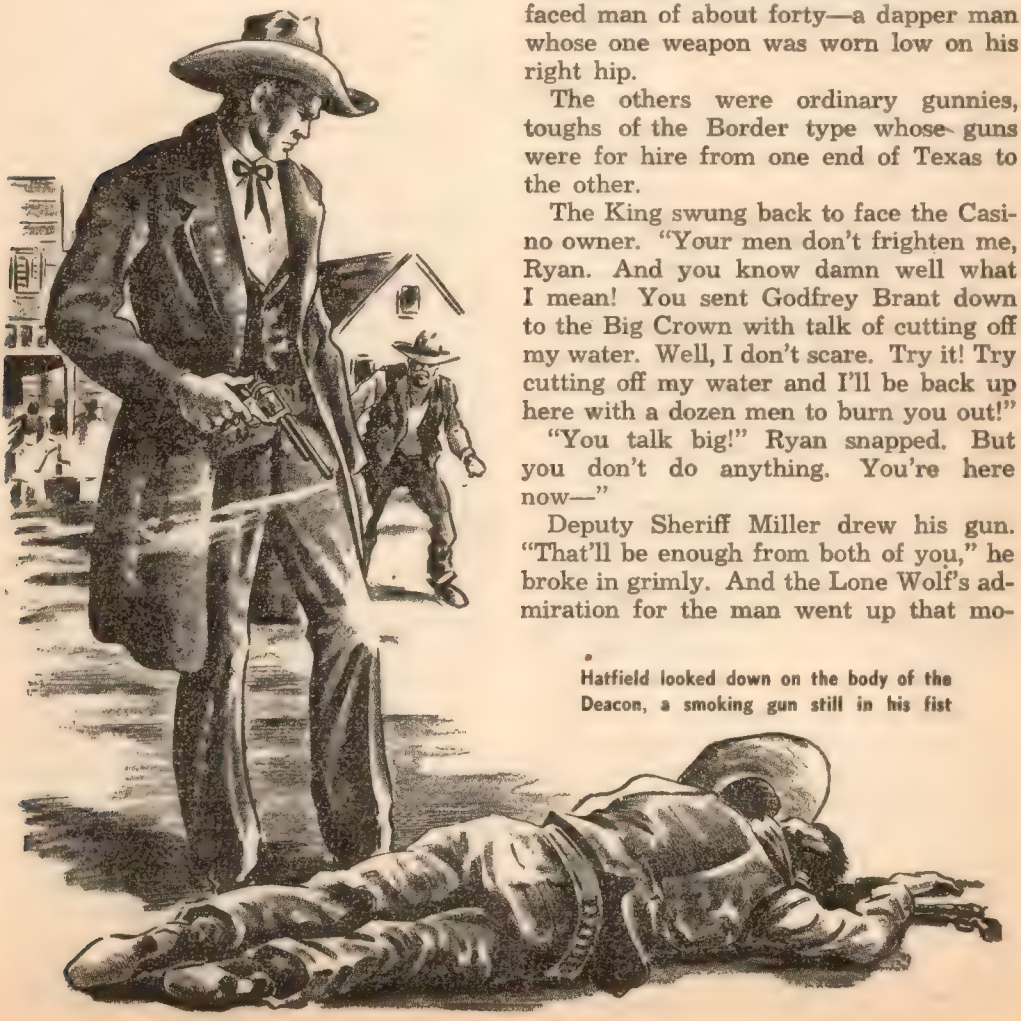
Siding him was a small, wiry, dark-faced man of about forty—a dapper man whose one weapon was worn low on his right hip.

The others were ordinary gunnies, toughs of the Border type whose guns were for hire from one end of Texas to the other.

The King swung back to face the Casino owner. "Your men don't frighten me, Ryan. And you know damn well what I mean! You sent Godfrey Brant down to the Big Crown with talk of cutting off my water. Well, I don't scare. Try it! Try cutting off my water and I'll be back up here with a dozen men to burn you out!"

"You talk big!" Ryan snapped. But you don't do anything. You're here now—"

Deputy Sheriff Miller drew his gun. "That'll be enough from both of you," he broke in grimly. And the Lone Wolf's admiration for the man went up that mo-



Hatfield looked down on the body of the Deacon, a smoking gun still in his fist

ment. A queer bird, Miller surely was, but he had nerve.

"Let King make his play," Ryan said harshly. "That's what he's come for."

"No!" the lawman barked. "There'll be no shoot-out in this town while I pack the star. —You!" he turned to the big cattleman. "If you've got a complaint, see Sheriff Winters down in Bueno Padre. Or ride up here alone. I'll lissen. Leave your men back at the ranch. If you've got nothing to hang your accusations on, then don't make them!"

"I'll make them!" King Hudson thundered, his face dark. "And I'll back 'em up. You may be under that tinhorn's thumb, Miller, but I can have your star for this! When I get back to Bueno Padre I'm going over Sheriff Winter's head. I'll see the commissioners—"

"See 'em and be damned!" Miller snapped. "But right now you're turnin' around and riding out of here with your men!"

"Just a minute, Miller!"

Steve Gundar, one of Estes' gunhands, broke away from his men and came toward the lawman. His gray eyes were on Hudson's face, holding him. "Seems I been hearing King here making big talk. Accused me of heading a bunch of rustlers stealing Big Crown beefs. Maybe he'd like to tell me to my face, Miller!"

The King didn't scare, not even for Steve. This scarred man had a reputation in this neck of the woods. Hatfield could see that by the way Miller suddenly backed down, by the taut look that came to the faces of the Big Crown riders.

"Steve," Miller said weakly, "keep out of this!"

Steve Gundar brushed the lawman aside with a hard-muscled arm. "Back your talk, King! Or didn't you expect to find me in town?"

"I ain't carrying a gun," King answered angrily. "Maybe it wouldn't do me any good if I did. But—"

"Talk!" Steve sneered. "I've heard enough of it. Back your play, King—and make it good!"

King Hudson glanced at his men. He wasn't yellow. But he had not come prepared for a shoot-out, and now he hated to back down. Hatfield saw him weigh the odds against him in a shoot-out.

Deputy Sheriff Miller was standing white-faced, helpless, to one side of Gundar. Ryan Estes was laughing softly.

CHAPTER III

Impostor

IT WAS time to take a hand, Hatfield decided.

"Just a minute," he said mildly, prodding Gundar's shoulder with a stiff forefinger. "I think Deputy Miller said for you to keep out of this. Seeing as how he's the law hereabouts—"

Steve Gundar whirled on him, eyes glittering. "Who in hell are you?" he demanded.

"Just an innocent bystander," Hatfield said levelly. "But where I come from the law means something."

"You damn fool!" Gundar cut in harshly. "I'll teach you to butt in!"

No one saw Hatfield move as Steve lunged for him. But one moment the gunslinger was plunging toward him—the next instant he was spinning off the walk to land face-down in the dust almost at King Hudson's feet!

The men who were behind the Big Crown riders remained rooted, staring at their motionless leader with unbelieving eyes. The dark-faced man called Lepage who had walked beside Gundar muttered: *"Sacre bleu!* Eet ees impossible!"

Belatedly then, several of the toughs made a move for their guns. But again the tall, green-eyed man with the slow smile stopped them. The guns that materialized in his hands were rock-steady.

"I'm not looking for trouble," he said drily. "But I'm backing the law, gents. And the law said to break this up!"

Lepage lifted his dark face to Estes. Ryan Estes' face showed his shocked sur-

prise. Miller was staring down at the prostrate Gundar as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

King Hudson let out a long breath. "I don't know who you are," he told Hatfield. "But any time you want a job rodding my spread—and there isn't a bigger one within five hundred miles—you're hired."

"I'm not for hire," Hatfield answered coolly. "And you heard the deputy. Take your men out of town. He meant now!"

"Now wait a minute—" King blustered, taken back at the tall man's tone of authority.

"Right now!"

The order was final. King Hudson stared into those greenish eyes and he saw no compromise. He swung the stallion about. "Come on, boys!" he growled. "We'll settle this another day!"

Hatfield watched them ride down Mesa Boulevard and take the turn out of town. Beside him Deputy Miller began to curse, softly, letting his tension ebb. Steve Gundar was beginning to stir, pawing aimlessly in the dust.

"Guess I lingered long enough, Miller," Hatfield observed quietly. "I'll ride along to see Godfrey, if you don't mind?"

Miller shook his head, awed. "No, reckon I don't mind at-all." He looked back at Estes, still standing rigid in his doorway. He ran his wondering gaze over the amazed spectators, to settle on the gunnies behind Lepage. Then back to Steve, whose reputation with a gun was second only to that of the fabulous Deacon Sellers.

"No," he repeated dazedly. "And I reckon no one else minds, either!"

Smoothly Goldy loped along, stretching his silky muscles, glad to have Hatfield in saddle again. There was a bond between these two, an attachment built out of a thousand lonely nights when each had only the other for company. Fashioned out of the dust of uncounted miles, of many a now forgotten trail.

Jim Hatfield settled easily in saddle. He turned the sorrel at the fork Miller had indicated and followed the trace that led into the gash of Mirage Canyon.

A cool wind from the uplands ahead blew down the funnel of the canyon, forcing the hot air from the drylands to rise above it.

Goldy took the grade easily. The Ranger patted the proudly arched neck. "Looked like bad trouble there for a while, eh?" he muttered. "But I don't like that Estes homebre's looks. He's too smooth, and he was ready to sucker me into a horse deal. As if I'd take ten times what he offered for you!"

GOLDY'S ears flattened and he snorted as though the idea of being sold to anyone was ridiculous.

"Something's mighty queer in these parts," Hatfield went on. "I can't figger what King Hudson meant. Way he talked he had Godfrey tied in with this Estes hombre. Well, we'll get the straight of it when we see Brant."

He settled to steady riding. The canyon opened up after the first miles, the walls falling back into graduated steps. Some two hours later he topped a small bench between the vari-colored walls and pulled up to let Goldy blow.

On his left the canyon shoulder shimmered in the heat coming up from the drylands. An antelope appeared on the rim, its magnificent body outlined against the azure sky.

For one brief moment Hatfield had a clear vision of the buck. Then the canyon wall seemed to recede, to fade out into a limitless expanse of water. So real was the transition that the Lone Wolf muttered in amazement.

Swells were visible under the sky, white-capped and running fast—and hoving into sight was a four-masted schooner, beating crosswise against the wind. Her port rail was low over the running sea, and men lined the deck, shouting terrified calls that made no sound.

Goldy snorted and edged back. Hatfield reached over to pat the deep chest soothingly.

"A mirage!" he said wonderingly. "Nothing but a mirage. But one of the

clearest I ever saw, Goldy. No wonder they call this Mirage Canyon."

The scene lasted all of twenty minutes. The running sea and the schooner beating against the wind blanked out the upper portions of the canyon, and for a moment Hatfield imagined he could hear the shouts of those men lining her rail.

Then the sea shimmered, broke up into patches, and the next moment was gone. The buck on the rim had vanished.

"Wonder if those men aboard her were in trouble?" Hatfield mused. He knew that mirages were formed by heat changes in the atmosphere—optical illusions caused by the refraction of light passing through layers of atmosphere of varying density. Sometimes these illusions were real scenes, transposed from miles away by these atmospheric quirks.

An hour later the canyon trail brought him to the summit and Hatfield pulled up to take in Mirage Valley.

It was a small valley, set like the inside of a cup on this high land. His eye measured the length and width of it. In the distance the Padres made a natural barrier to the country beyond, curving in two rough wings to enclose the valley almost completely. Set down in the center of this was Godfrey's B-in-a-Box.

From his vantage point Hatfield saw the possibilities of this spread, the natural beauty of this land sheltered by the Padres. And he noted, too, its drawback—brought sharply to focus by the half-dozen windmills scattered between him and the ranch buildings.

"Taylor's Folly," he said softly.

A half hour later he rode into the ranchyard. The buildings were well-kept. Someone had thought enough of the place to lay out a truck garden behind the one-story, rambling house, to mend the corrals, and whitewash the 'dobe ranchhouse. Someone had even laid out flower beds along the west wall.

That was the first impression Hatfield got of Brant's spread, the trim neatness. Then he saw the four horses nosing the corral bars, saddled and ready for riding. Four men were just coming out of the main house, evidently having heard the sorrel turn into the yard.

Hatfield turned Goldy toward the house.

The leader of the group, a heavy-set chunky man with bushy dark brows, and wearing black shirt and levis, stopped spraddle-legged on the porch. "Howdy, stranger," he greeted roughly. "You lost your way?"

"Are you Godfrey Brant?" Jim Hatfield countered.

THE man took his time answering. The gun on his right hip was the only clean thing on him—it was recently oiled and the walnut butt was slicked smooth from much handling. He had a thick crop of whiskers, but his hair receded from his low brow. He had a sullen look.

"Yeah," he answered. "What can I do for you?"

There was a sullen tension in the air that cautioned Hatfield. He said, "Bill said you needed help. He sent me."

The chunky man considered this. "Yeah, I remember." He dismissed the information with a shrug. "I've changed my mind. I don't need help. I'm quitting this spread." He waved a hand to the waiting horses. "Fact is, we was just leaving. Pulling out for good."

Hatfield sized up the men standing slack-hipped behind the slovenly leader. They looked like a bunch of mean cutthroats, rather than hard-working cowhands. And he suspected that the chunky man was lying. He wasn't Godfrey Brant. He wasn't old enough, for one thing. And McDowell had said Brant had been crippled by a bullet in his right knee. This man didn't limp.

But the Ranger couldn't prove anything. He had never seen Godfrey Brant, and McDowell might have been mistaken in some details.

"I came a long way to help out. If there's anything I can do—"

The chunky man scowled. "Thanks, anyway, fella. But I'm through here. Sorry to have caused you this trouble."

"This looks like a nice spread," Hatfield

persisted. "With enough water—"

"That's the rub," the fake Brant said flatly. "Water. That's what licked the Englishman who owned this place before me. He broke himself sinking windmills all over the place. There's an old river bed runs right through the valley, and he claimed there should be water down under the surface. He never found it. But he convinced me, and I bought the place from him." The heavy man shrugged. "I made a bad deal, I reckon."

"Too bad," Hatfield sympathized. He leaned forward. "You know, I think I'd like to buy this spread, Godfrey. Seeing as how you're set on leaving. I'll take a chance on finding water."

The other man scowled. "You're a little late, Mr.—"

"Hatfield. Jim Hatfield."

"You're a mite too late, Hatfield. I've already got a buyer."

"A little competition helps any business deal," Hatfield persisted. He was baiting the man, strengthening his suspicion that this sour-faced hombre was not Godfrey Brant. "I'll top any bid you may have had for the ranch."

The man became truculent. "I've made my deal, Hatfield. Sorry."

Hatfield shrugged. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it, there's nothing more I can do here. I'll tell Bill you decided to sell out. You know Bill was an old friend of yours, and when he got your letter, he asked me to ride up here."

"Yeah. Tell Bill I'll see him after I get through here." The man obviously was only waiting for Hatfield to leave. "Sorry," he repeated edgily, "to have brought you down here for nothing, Hatfield."

Hatfield shrugged. He swung Goldy around. The chunky man was standing spread-legged, watching. Hatfield rode out of the yard, and the last thing he heard was the creaking of the rusting windmill behind the tool shed.

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CHAPTER IV

Trouble Muttering

JIM HATFIELD made Vanishing Wells just before sunset and was aware of the curious stares that followed him down the street. The town seemed buzzing with suppressed anticipation. Not since a man named Larry Aiken had bucked Deacon Sellars, right here in front of the Red Dog Saloon, had there been such excitement. Aiken had been good with a gun, but he had not even cleared leather when he threw down on the Deacon.

"I tell you, he ain't got a chance," the paunchy proprietor of the Quick & Easy Lunch said to a group of customers. "Steve wasn't expecting trouble when that jasper hit him. It'll be different next time."

"I dunno," one old-timer said, knuckling his peppery beard thoughtfully. "Did you take a good look at that galoot? I was across the street when Joe Fenton tried to shove him around. He handled Joe like a baby. And did you see him hit Steve? *Did you? I* didn't! But Steve spun around and dropped like he'd been pole-axed. And him weighing more'n two hundred." The oldster shook his head. "I dunno, Mike. This looks like a job for the Deacon."

"Funniest eyes I ever saw," a thin, scrawny man chipped in. "Green, I'd say, and when he looked around the Square I swear they looked right through a man."

"Green eyes or no," the paunchy proprietor scoffed, "I got odds that say Steve'll take him."

He had a surprising amount of takers.

Unconscious of the excitement he was causing, Jim Hatfield rode on to the livery stable where he assured himself Goldy would be well taken care of. Coming out, he paused to look down the street, his eyes puzzled. He was still pretty sure the man he had talked to had not been Godfrey Brant.

But if the man was not Godfrey, then where was Godfrey?

He decided to have a talk with the law.

Stoop Miller was thumbing through papers on his desk when the Ranger walked in, ducking a little in the doorway. The deputy's suspicious eyes lighted up. "You came back early. Did you see Godfrey?"

Hatfield pushed his hat back on his head and ran his long sinewy fingers through his crisp black hair. "No, I didn't," he said frankly. "And I don't like what I ran into up there."

"How's that?" Miller said, coming to his feet.

"First of all, let me ask you some questions," Hatfield said, smiling.

"Shoot."

"How well do you know Godfrey Brant?"

"Well enough," Miller answered, surprised.

"Is he a chunkily built man, sloppy, wears one gun, a sour expression? Full beard, partly bald?"

"No," the lawman answered. "Doesn't sound like anyone I know, either."

"That's the man who claimed he was Godfrey," Hatfield explained. "I never saw Godfrey myself, so I couldn't be sure. But this man claimed he was Godfrey Brant and he was quitting the ranch. Had three tough-looking men out there he said were his riders."

Miller shook his head. "Godfrey didn't hire any men. Didn't have more'n a hundred head all told to take care of, I understand. Besides, he only bought the spread a while back from Ryan Estes. When Clyde Taylor, the Englishman who owned the place before Brant did went busted, he sold out to Estes. Estes sold to Brant."

"Kinda back and forth swap, eh?" Hatfield grinned. "How does Estes figure in this setup? What did King Hudson mean when he spoke about Estes' spy?"

Miller frowned. "There's been bad blood between Hudson and Estes from the time Hudson came to Payoff Valley. That's over yonder, past the Padres. Hudson was a big man back East. Seems he made a pile of money in railroad stocks, then decides to come to Texas to raise cattle. His Big Crown outfit's one of the biggest in the State. Estes was running a gaming table in Bueno Padre. Seems he took the King for a pile of *dinero* before the King found out the wheel was rigged. He ran Ryan out of town on a rail."

MILLER shook his head at the remembrance. "I reckon Ryan never forgot. He came up here and opened the Casino. Vanishing Wells was on the point of giving up the ghost when he came. But a heap of tough hombres began to drift into town after Estes got here. Sheriff Winters, down in Bueno Padre, decided that I'd better come up here and keep an eye on things. Specially after the stage was held up twice just east of town."

He got up and walked to the window and looked out with suddenly bitter eyes. "I reckon I'm gettin' too old for this job. I'm the law here, but Ryan Estes runs it. I'm not fooling myself." He turned and walked back to his desk, a man older than his years. "Not that I've got anything on Ryan. Far as I know he's been minding his own business in town. I don't think he and Godfrey teamed up against King. But Hudson seems to think so. You heard the King today. Can't say I blame Estes, either, for hiring hisself a bunch of tough gunnies as protection."

Hatfield shrugged. "There's something going on, Miller, that I don't like. Godfrey expected me. If he was around, he'd have been up at the ranch, waiting. Instead I find someone else who claims he's Godfrey. That means either Godfrey pulled his stakes before I got here—which I don't believe—or someone got him out of the way. I'm going to stay around to find out which."

Miller shook his head. "I'll ride up there with you in the morning," he said worriedly. "But if I was you, I'd leave town. You didn't do yourself any good when you sided in with me this evening."

Hatfield dismissed the suggestion with a shrug. "See you in the morning, Miller."

The Lone Wolf went up to his room, past the wide-eyed stare of the clerk behind the desk. He washed and shaved and then, refreshed, walked to the lone window which gave him a view of the darkening skyline and the bulk of the Mirages. It was a two-story drop to the alley between the hotel and the Mikado Casino next door. A star winked like a big yellow firefly in the eastern sky.

Someone was pounding out a tune to a girl's throaty singing in the Casino. A wagon backed out of a store yard, the driver's cursing audible in the hot night. Somewhere in the distance some drunk celebrated by emptying his Colt in the air.

Hatfield's gaze was sombre. Another town, like a hundred others he had visited. Boss-ruled. The incident in the square had revealed who really ran Vanishing Wells. The job was too big for Miller, and Hatfield had a moment of sympathy for the worried lawman.

Checking his guns, he blew out the light and went downstairs, through the lobby and out into the dark street. Most of the merriment seemed to be coming from the Casino. But Hatfield ignored it for the moment and walked up Mesa Boulevard, turning into the Quick & Easy Lunch.

The paunchy proprietor was talking with a quietly dressed man in town clothes. They stopped talking as Hatfield slid a long leg over a stool. "Evening, stranger," the man murmured.

The Ranger nodded curtly, not feeling in a talkative mood.

The counterman came to him and he gave his order. "T-bone steak, French fries, coffee, and apple pie." He watched the counterman shout the order to the cook through an opening in the rear wall.

"Staying in town?" the neatly dressed man asked.

Hatfield shrugged.

"My name's Melvyn Bates," the other man said. "I handle the law in Vanishing Wells."

Hatfield's eyes crinkled. "Sheriff, or town marshal?"

"Neither, I'm a lawyer."

Hatfield smiled coldly. "Didn't know Vanishing Wells had need of your kind of law. From what I've seen the people hereabouts prefer the kind backed by a forty-five."

Bates shook his head. "I'm afraid you've got the wrong impression of Vanishing Wells, Mr.— ah—"

"Hatfield," the Lone Wolf supplied levelly. "The handle's been whittled down to Jim."

The lawyer looked at him speculatively. "I attend to all Mr. Estes' legal matters, Mr. Hatfield. If you are here on business, may I have the pleasure of offering you my assistance?"

"I'll consider it," Hatfield said shortly.

BATES got up, dropped some change on the counter, said "Good night, Mike," to the proprietor, and walked out. The Ranger watched him step onto the walk, pause a moment, then turn right. The street was dark, the buildings across the way unlighted.

Some faint warning began to tap at the Lone Wolf's nerves. He had been in too many tight spots not to sense certain danger signals. Mike seemed nervous, also. He had retired to the far end of the counter and was wiping coffee mugs. Occasionally he glanced out to the dark street.

Hatfield's order was placed in the opening and the proprietor brought it to him. He ate slowly. There was only one light in the small room and it hung over the counter, almost directly overhead.

He was starting on his pie when Bates returned. The lawyer had a stiff grin on his narrow face. "Forgot my favorite cheroots," he explained. He walked to the counter and bought his cigars. "Have one," he offered Hatfield who shook his head. "Hope you have a pleasant stay in town, Mr. Hatfield," Bates said politely.

He walked to the door and paused to light his cigar. He stood there, partially blocking the doorway, until he had the tobacco well-fired. Then he stepped quickly out of sight.

Simultaneously, the Lone Wolf slid off his stool and lunged for the opposite wall.

A bullet scoured a wicked groove in the counter, shattering his coffee cup. The rifle crack was almost lost in the general clamor from the Casino.

The Lone Wolf's right-hand Colt spat angrily, cuffing the overhead light into oblivion. The paunchy counterman yelled in sudden fright. Loud cries sounded in the street.

In the general confusion, Hatfield slid through the doorway. Men were running toward the lunchroom. He collided with the foremost, gripped the man's shoulder and spun around. Light reflected faintly from the star on Miller's coat.

"Hold it!" Hatfield said sharply as the lawman cursed and reached for his gun. "The excitement's over, Miller."

"You!" the deputy growled, peering up at Hatfield. "Damn it man, what's happened this time?"

"Someone tried to give me indigestion," Hatfield said unsmilingly. "With a lead slug." Quickly he explained the shooting.

The lawman groaned. "I warned you to get out of town. There's been more trouble in Vanishing Wells since you came than in the whole year I've been here!"

The lunchroom proprietor was bellowing his complaint. Someone brought a lamp from the kitchen and set it on the counter. Its yellow glow seeped out through the doorway, giving Hatfield a chance to scan the faces of the bystanders. Bates was nowhere in sight.

"Do me a favor," Miller said, wiping his forehead with a blue polka dot handkerchief. "Go to your room and turn in. In the morning take the stage out of Vanishing Wells."

Hatfield chuckled. "You've got me wrong, Deputy. I'm a peaceable man."

"Yeah," Miller muttered dubiously. "So's dynamite—until somebody touches a match to it. Hey!" he yelled. "Where you headed for now?"

"I'm dropping in at the Casino," Hatfield answered. "I need a little excitement."

Miller's mouth opened. He remained stupefied as the tall, broad-shouldered man faded into the shadows across the street. "Excitement!" he finally muttered. "One day in Vanishing Wells and he's sent Joe to the doc's, handled Steve like he was a ten-year-old boy, braced King Hudson, and been shot at. And he says he craves excitement!"

The object of the deputy's comments made his way down the shadowed street, his long legs carrying him along at a good pace. The Casino was class even for a bigger town than this desert settlement. Its two big windows, flanking the batwing doors, spilled light into the square. The bottom panes which the tough called Joe had shattered with his head had been boarded up.

THE Lone Wolf shouldered through the batwings. Several big oil lights brightened the big room. A cherrywood bar ran the length of the west wall, and it was well-patronized. Casino tables, a roulette wheel, chuck-a-luck. All the fixings. Even the girls.

The girls passed among the tables and the customers at the brass rail, gaudily painted, spangled, laughing. Percentage girls. A small space, beyond the piano was reserved for dancing.

Hatfield searched among the customers for the Casino owner. But Estes was either in his office, or had gone out of town.

The Lone Wolf made his way to the bar. The toughs at the rail edged away, giving him elbow room. He ordered his drink, turned and leaned back with his elbows on the counter and watched the girls. A dark-eyed blonde with an impish smile came up to him and he bought her a drink. While he laughed with her his eyes didn't miss the skinny man with the cast in his left eye who suddenly broke away from the end of the bar and headed fast for the door marked PRIVATE.

The piano player was a young, curly-headed man of less than twenty. He wore a gaudy crimson shirt and garter armbands. He got up on his bench and began to yell for quiet.

When the general clamor had subsided to the point where he could be heard he

announced: "And now, ladies and gents —we give you, Pepita, the Mexican fireball! Pepita'll dance her version of the Mexican hat dance."

CHAPTER V

The Second Man

A ROAR went up from the crowd which continued as a small, dark-eyed, olive-skinned girl in a low cut red gown glittering with sequins came out to the vacated dance space. She had castanets in her hands, a red bougainvillea in her hair, tucked in over her right ear.

The piano player beat out his accompanying rhythm. Pepita was good. She was small and wiry, and her step was light, graceful, quick. One by one men pressed close to the dance space to throw their hats at her feet.

Pepita's eyes seemed to linger on the tall man at the bar, watching her. Her smile was inviting. Hatfield shrugged. He shouldered his way through the group and suddenly sailed his J.B. onto the dance space.

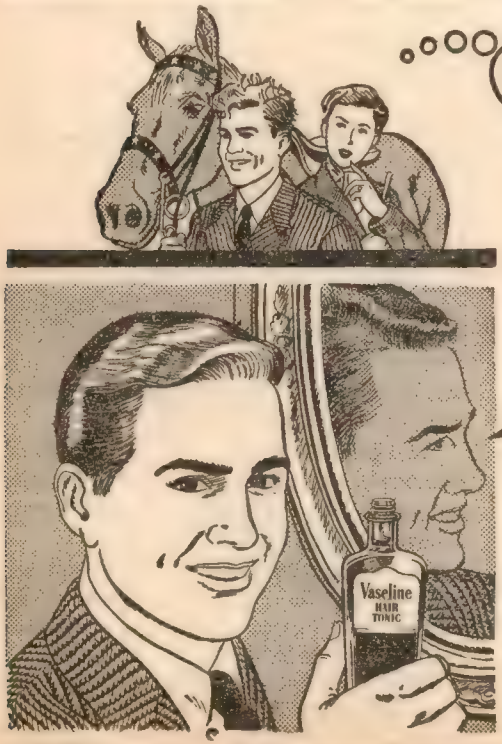
His eyes were on the slim dancer and for once he didn't see what happened when somewhere to one side a Colt boomed heavily, and simultaneously his hat jumped. Pepita screamed. She backed away from the hat with the hole through the crown, heedlessly trampling the others.

The crowd was falling away from the door marked "PRIVATE," revealing Steve Gundar framed in the opening, a Colt still smoking in his big fist. There was a lump on his jaw, visible at a distance. The scar across his nose gave him a malevolent look.

"Kind of getting around a bit, pilgrim?" he said to Hatfield.

"Some," Hatfield admitted. He was

[*Turn page*]



"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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watching the gun in the man's hand. Around him the crowd was edging away, leaving him alone on the edge of the dance space.

"You sure pulled a fast one on me this afternoon," Gundar said softly. "I wasn't expecting a tenderfoot to swing on me." Without thinking he reached up and lightly back-knuckled the bruise on his jaw. "You pack a wallop, pilgrim. Now let's see how handy you are with them irons you're wearing!"

"Some men talk big," the Lone Wolf pointed out drily "when they hold a gun in their hand."

"You damn fool!" Steve Gundar breathed. He came scuffing forward, his eyes glittering crazily in the light from the lamps. "Here's your chance—and your one-way ticket to Boothill!"

He slid his gun into holster and dropped his hands, arms crooked, by his thighs. He was big and fast and confident—and he was laughing as he drew.

No one saw the Lone Wolf's hands move. But Steve Gundar died with his hands gripping the butts of his guns, died with two bullets spaced less than an inch apart, cutting the bottom seam of his shirt pocket.

The heavy, racking explosions filtered out of that stunned house, leaving a shocked stillness that was as brittle as glass. The petrified crowd stared at the fallen gunman whose reputation had been second only to that of the notorious Deacon Sellars.

One of the percentage girls began to laugh hysterically. A man swore. Over at the edge of the bar someone intoned: "He who lives by the gun—" He had no need to finish.

Hatfield walked to the dance floor and picked up his hat. He fingered the hole in the crown. Then he tossed it back on the floor and walked back to the bar. He leaned on his elbows, his strange green eyes took in that stunned crowd, one by one.

"And now," he said almost gently, "we'll get on with the dance. Unless"—softly—"someone has objections?"

No one had. . . .

SITTING in front of his office next morning, Stoop Miller saw the tall stranger who had shocked Vanishing Wells to its hard-bitten core come out of the hotel, swing with brisk strides to the livery stable. Five minutes later he rode out on the golden sorrel, the likes of which Miller admitted he had never seen. Not even King Hudson's big cream stallion matched it. And, the lawman guessed cynically, there was more intelligence in that golden animal's head than in most of Vanishing Wells' nondescript inhabitants.

He shifted on the bench and suddenly winced as a sharp pain twinged his right shoulder. He was getting old, he admitted. If he had any sense left, he'd ride down to Bueno Padre and hand in his star. He had thought long about doing this very thing when Estes had shut him up yesterday. He knew it would have been suicide for him to make a move against Steve Gundar, and he was too honest to carry on the farce of upholding the law here after that. That is, until what had happened last night.

He still couldn't believe it. Not even after he had gone to the funeral parlor and looked into Gundar's cold face. Long habit of taking this man's reputation at face value died slowly.

He had planned to ride down and turn in his star, but now a strange and inner joy began to dance in him. All these months he had lived under the shadow of the guns of Steve Gundar and the Deacon. And now a stranger had come to Vanishing Wells to side him, a tenderfoot in garb, who didn't scare.

He reached in his coat pocket for his pipe and tobacco and absently began packing the briar. "Reckon I'll wait a while before turning in my star."

He sat on the bench, feeling the sun's rays warm him. Along about eight o'clock a man came out of the Casino and headed for the stables in the rear. He rode out of the alley, mounted on a long-legged roan, rode up Mesa Boulevard at a clip, and turned out of town.

Miller chuckled. He hadn't felt this good in a long time. "Go ahead," he muttered gleefully. "Go get the Deacon. Tell him all hell's broke loose, and a tall stranger with green eyes has been making monkeys out of Estes' gunhands!"

He got up then, stretched stiffly, and headed for the lunchroom. For the first time in months he felt he was going to enjoy his breakfast. . . .

Shortly before noon the second man to inquire after Godfrey rode into Vanishing Wells. He was a slender, tawny-haired fellow, dressed in whipcord britches, a tan shirt, a soft leather jacket. He didn't ride too well, and he was mounted on a run-of-the-mill buckskin.

He came searching along the buildings, and his glance hit Miller who was back sunning himself on his bench, skidded up to the terse "LAW OFFICE" painted on the window behind him, and that seemed to decide him.

He pulled the buckskin in to the short rack and said cheerfully: "Howdy, Pop. Where do I find Godfrey Brant?"

Miller was peeved. "In hell, maybe," he answered ill-manneredly. Then, as the young fellow's face grew suddenly cold and still, he was mollified. "Who's askin'?"

The young man leaned forward on his saddle, his eyes amused. "You got ulcers?"

Miller scowled.

"Or perhaps just plain indigestion," the rider added. "My name's Jeffrey Brant. Godfrey's my father."

Miller came up off the bench, peering at the likable young fellow on the buckskin. "Why'n't you say so before?" he growled.

"You didn't seem to care," young Brant said innocently. He stepped down from the saddle, winced a little as he stiff-legged up to the boardwalk. "Haven't had much practice with these Western cayuses," he apologized. "They're kinda hard on the backside."

Miller shook his head. Things were getting too blamed complicated. The first hombre who'd asked for Godfrey had turned out to be hell on wheels. This one couldn't even ride a horse.

"Take the first fork outside town, heading south," he growled. He pointed with exaggerated gesture, thereby indicating his distrust of this young rider's ability

A TALL TEXAS TALE

A GRIZZLY BEAR ON A TEAR

ONE dark night in Fort Worth a big, hairy, barrel-chested citizen walked into a saloon, pulled out his sixgun and promptly shot the neck off the bottle from which the bartender was just pouring a drink. Then with prodigious alacrity he leaped to the bar-top and walked along it, kicking drinks to the right and left of him.

He paused in the center of the long bar, planted his great feet wide apart and brandished his gun at the now wide-eyed patrons.

"I'm a grizzly bear on a tear," he roared, "and I came to clean out this den of iniquity! So get going, you sons of hyenas!" He shot out a light by way of emphasis. "Get going pronto, all you yellow-livered coyotes and curly wolves!"

There was an immediate stampede for the doors, and in a matter of seconds the saloon was empty, except for a shriveled little man in a derby hat who stood at the far end of the bar calmly viewing the mad exodus.

"Well?" growled the big man, glaring at him.

The dried-up little character merely grinned and reached for his beer. "Sure was a lot of 'em, warn't there," he said.

to follow even the simplest directions. "When you gets to the fork, take the south trail. That's the left hand trail, son. Get it? The left hand trail!"

JEFF BRANT grinned. He had warm brown eyes and his grin lit up a strong, not unhandsome face. "Maybe you'd better come along, Pop. Just so's I don't get lost."

Miller turned sharply, looking suspiciously into Jeff's face. But Jeff's features were frank. "Seems to me," Miller grumbled, "I wanted to make sure the other fella wouldn't get lost either. But he turned out to be a holy terror."

"What other fellow?"

"There was a jasper in here yesterday, said he wanted to see Godfrey. Quiet-looking hombre, talked like an Easterner. Like you."

"Did he see my father?"

"No. Said something about talking to a man who claimed he was Godfrey—Say," the deputy-sheriff interrupted himself. "Maybe I'd better come along with you, son. If your pa's at home, I want to talk to him."

The young man nodded. "I'd sure appreciate it, Pop."

"The name's Miller—Henry Miller," the deputy corrected stiffly. "Most folks hereabouts call me Stoop." He saw the beginning of a grin on Jeff's face and he snapped. "And that don't stand for stupid, son!"

Jeff's eyes widened innocently. He turned to the buckskin and looped the trailing reins over the tie pole. "This looks like it'll be a hot ride, Mr. Miller. And a dry one. Coming into town I noticed at least five saloons in the first block. Let me buy you a drink."

The deputy warmed to him. "For an Easterner you talk sense," he admitted. "I usually buy mine at the Outpost. They cut their likker less there."

A half-hour later they rode up the Mirage trail. The sun warmed the land and the cooler breeze, coming down from the uplands, was exhilarating. Jeff commented on the vari-colored walls of the canyon, heard from Miller the legends of this strange cut.

At top of the plateau the cuplike valley fell away before them, and Miller remarked: "That's your dad's place. Nice place to live. Enough water for human consumption, a few head of cattle. But nowhere near enough water for the cattle that could be raised here. Notice the natural protection from the elements, the natural boundaries? A fence thrown across this entrance to Mirage Canyon and you'd have no more worries about drift."

They rode down into the whitened bed of an old watercourse and Jeff's eyes lightened speculatively. "Looks like a river ran here once."

Miller nodded. "Must have been before our time, son." He pointed to the far hills. "Them's the Padres. Payoff Creek starts up there and comes down almost into this valley before veering off and going down into Payoff Gorge. Just a freak of chance, but that means water for Payo Valley and the Big Crown, and no water for Mirage Valley."

"That so?" Jeff muttered.

They rode on into the yard. The bunkhouse door was open. No one was inside, although several of the bunks showed use. Turning, they walked into the ranchhouse. There were cigarette butts on the floor. Coffee cups lay soiled on the table. Flies buzzed over their rims.

But no sign of Godfrey. He had left no note lying around. His Winchester was across pegs over the stone fireplace. But the bedroom was bare of personal belongings. "Looks like your pop pulled his stakes, son," Miller said.

Jeff shook his head. "He knew I was coming. I wired him before I left. Why should he leave before I got here? And leave no word?"

The deputy shrugged. "Maybe he planned to show up later in town. You say you wasn't sure when you could get here."

"These cups," Jeff said grimly. "Someone's been here. Recently."

Miller's face was grave. "Better ride back with me, Jeff. If there's been trouble

you might be setting right smack in the middle of it, if you stay."

Jeff's lips set stubbornly. "I'm staying. This is my father's ranch, and he wrote me to meet him here. And if there's been trouble, well—" He walked over to the fireplace and took the Winchester down, hefting it. "I'm not much good with a hand gun," he said grimly, "but I've handled a rifle before."

Miller shrugged, "Well, I'll be ridin' back. If your dad shows up in Vanishing Wells, I'll tell him you're here."

Jeff nodded. He walked to the porch with the lawman and watched Miller fork his horse and ride away. When the deputy was a speck on the trail, Jeff turned and let his gaze dwell on the shouldering bulks of the Padres, recalling the letter he had received before leaving for the West.

His father had been economical with his information when he had written. But Jeff knew the lines by heart.

Jeff—I want you to come out here, if you're not tied up. I bought a spread which I think is a lulu. Man who sold it to me thought he had a sucker. But I found a way to get water. All the water I need. But I need your help. Let's see if that engineering degree you just got ain't just paper. I'll be here waiting for you. *Dad*

Evidently something had happened to Godfrey Brant. Someone else must have found out what Jeff's father had discovered concerning water.

Slowly Jeff walked back to the bedroom, rumaged around in the dresser until he found what he was looking for. Bringing the half-filled box of .30-30 shells into the kitchen, he loaded the Winchester. "Might as well make myself at home," he thought, putting his things away.

CHAPTER VI

Deacon Sellars

ON THE stage road to Bueno Padre, Hatfield topped the lower ridges of the Mirages and reined in to let his eyes take in the country beyond. It was well past mid-morning.

"Reckon that's Payoff Valley, Goldy," he said to the golden sorrel. "Quite a change from the country that we just left, eh?"

The green valley sprawling out in gently rolling vista below him was in sharp contrast to the dry, brown, sterile country he had quitted. Far down the middle of Payoff a creek meandered its lazy way, its course marked by trees lining its banks. Off to the left the town of Bueno Padre cut its pattern in the valley, and far beyond the hazy hills of the Encillas made a broken line visible against the horizon.

This was King Hudson's domain, this fertile valley, and Hatfield frowned as he recalled the big cattleman's reply to Estes. Somehow in this puzzle over water, the King had reason to believe that Godfrey had threatened to deprive him of his water.

"Reckon it'll be a good idea to find out what King Hudson really knows, eh, Goldy?"

The sorrel tossed its head. Hatfield grinned and leaned over to scratch the base of a silky ear. "Let's go," he said gently.

They made Bueno Padre just after noon. Men turned to stare after the tall rider on the magnificent sorrel. He rode down the main street until he saw the sheriff's office, then pulled Goldy up at the rack.

Sheriff Winters was listening to the soft voice of a man lounging lazily against the near wall. He turned his head as Hatfield entered, his gray eyes flicking over this newcomer.

The sheriff was a man over fifty. A spare man with iron-gray hair still thick on his head, a long, bony face in which the mouth made a hard, uncompromising line.

He didn't look like a man who smiled often—the lines at the corners of his mouth went down, instead of up.

Hatfield said, "Afternoon, Sheriff," and let his gaze take in the tall, sad-faced man

in range clothes lounging against the wall. The first thing Hatfield noticed about this man were his guns.

Set in well-oiled black leather holsters, they had walnut handles that shone with a patina that only long and loving handling could give. They seemed a part of the man, as if they had grown with him, grown out of that long, lanky frame clad in black shirt and rough wool black pants.

He had long bony fingers on which tufts of black hair grew in dark patches. They bore no calluses. They seemed restless, full of movement, even when still. The man's neck was scrawny, burned a red black, and his face was long and sharp, like the sheriff's. Only it wasn't a hard face. It was a sad face. And surprisingly, the man's eyes, meeting Hatfield's, were a watery, mild blue.

He took his foot down slowly and continued his conversation with the sheriff, almost as if there had been no interruption. "I thought I'd drop by and let you know, Winters. He may be King around here. But the next time he says something he can't back, I'll get him." The man's voice wasn't loud, nor harsh—but the lawman shivered.

Winters licked his lips. "I'll tell him to lay off. I'll—"

The sad-faced man turned away, not bothering to let the sheriff finish. He walked past Hatfield, looked him over with one careless glance, frowned, glanced again, and moved on.

Hatfield said quietly, "I'm looking for Godfrey Brant, Sheriff."

The sad-faced man was in the doorway. He stopped as if the question had been directed to him. He took a long look at Hatfield, then turned away and went heeling down the walk.

WINTERS wiped his brow, an unconscious gesture. "You're a long way off track," he said tersely. "Brant's located in Mirage Valley, way back north of here. Head for Vanishing Wells and see my deputy, Miller. He'll show you how to get to Brant's place."

"I've come through Vanishing Wells," Hatfield informed him. "I've been to Mirage Valley."

"Well?" The sheriff looked up truculently. "Why bother me?"

"I couldn't locate Godfrey," Hatfield told him. "There were some men at the ranch. One of them claimed he was Godfrey. But he wasn't. I thought Godfrey might have come to Bueno Padre."

The sheriff shook his head. "Godfrey hasn't been in town in two weeks. He came by to see Rock Galligan over at the land office. Then he stopped by the office and made a funny crack." The sheriff scowled. "Said he'd just written to a friend of his and he expected all hell to break loose around here before the end of the month. He wouldn't say more, except that he was tired of sitting in the middle of the creek."

"What did he mean by that?" Hatfield asked.

"How do I know?" the sheriff rasped belligerently. "I ain't got time to unravel every damn fool remark made. I got troubles of my own." He looked squarely at Hatfield. "Did you get a good look at the man who just left?"

Hatfield nodded. "Seemed kind of sad. Lose his best frend?"

"That was the Deacon," the sheriff said. "Deacon Sellars!" He wiped his forehead again.

"Who's he?" Hatfield asked innocently.

The sheriff threw up his hands. "You're new to this part of the country all right," he groaned. "If you weren't you'd know about the Deacon. You can roll up Billy the Kid, Sam Bass and Johnny Ringo in one, add old Doc Halliday, and maybe you'd have something like the Deacon."

"Bad, eh?" Hatfield smiled.

The sheriff let out an exasperated growl.

Hatfield shrugged. "He still looks sad, like maybe he isn't getting enough to eat."

He was chuckling as he left the law office.

Bueno Padre, as the county seat, was quite a town. Hatfield found the land office man just about to close for lunch. He was a thin, small man with glasses, several gold-capped teeth, and a close-

mouthed manner.

"I'm trying to locate Godfrey Brant," Hatfield said.

Galligan told him just about what the sheriff had imparted. "Hasn't been around since that day," he finished.

"What did Godfrey see you for?"

Galligan went cautious. "That was confidential," he answered.

Hatfield nodded. "Never mind. And thanks for the information."

As he rode out of Bueno Padre, he reflected that his trip to town had accomplished two things. He had met the notorious Deacon Sellars, and learned that Godfrey had not been in Bueno Padre since he had mailed his letter to Captain McDowell.

There no longer was any doubt in the Lone Wolf's mind but that Godfrey had either been killed and his body secreted somewhere, or he had been kidnaped.

Hatfield followed a well-traveled road out of town and a few miles on a board sign with a crudely sketched crown and an arrow pointed east. He took the trail to King Hudson's ranch.

An hour later the trail dipped down toward the river. Trees and brush cast their welcome shade as the road wound through them. Goldy was loping along with distance-eating stride when a girl screamed.

Hatfield straightened in his stirrups. The scream came again, shrill, urgent. Terrified!

"Sounds like somebody's in trouble," Hatfield said. "Let's go see, Goldy!"

* * * * *

AT THE Big Crown Ranch, Miriam Hudson came out to the wide, honeysuckle-smelling porch where her father was having his breakfast served by Juanita, the house maid. The big L-shaped ranchhouse with its red tile roof had a dozen rooms. Set back from the other buildings that made up the Big Crown, its low cream-colored 'dobe walls snuggled behind bougainvillea, climbing vines and various other shrubs.

King Hudson had made his money back East, as Hatfield had been told in Vanishing Wells, and after his wife died he had come to Texas. Used to wealth and power, he had molded the Big Crown to suit his temperament, and he ruled over the little principality with a bluff yet iron hand.

Eating on the sunny veranda was a habit brought from the East, and he enjoyed his leisurely morning meal while he looked over the rolling expanse of his domain, to the far hills of the Padres.

Miriam had been in her teens when her father brought her here, and the freedom of this new life, unconfined by New England strictures of dress and manners, had allowed her to bloom to uninhibited womanhood. A girl of twenty-one now, she was tall, nicely-fashioned, and though the sun had darkened her yellow hair to warmer shades of brown, it had not robbed her face of its vital coloring. An athletic girl, she rode well. She rode Western style, and usually in a pair of belted levis, khaki shirt, and wide-brimmed sombrero.

This morning, though, she was in soft, doeskin riding britches, and wore a yellow silk blouse, and King noticed that her hair had been carefully combed, which fact indicated to him where she was going. It irritated him that she should persist in defying him this way, and his "Good morning" was half a growl.

"Now, Dad," she said, dropping into a chair opposite him. "Just because some stranger ordered you home yesterday, you needn't take it out on me."

"Who told you that story?" he glared.

She shrugged. "Juanita. She usually manages to pick up anything interesting that happens."

The dark-eyed Mexican girl, four years younger than Miriam and more knowing about men, came out at this moment, bringing Miriam's eggs and bacon.

"What's this you've been telling Miss Miriam?" King asked trenchantly.

"*Si*, Don King," Juanita said, shrugging shapely shoulders. "Tony, he tell me. Thees tall *estranjero* in Vanishing Wells,

he says, 'You go home, huh!' " She opened her dark eyes in wide innocence. "Tony, he say thees man make you and that Meester Estes shut up. *Muy pronto.*"

Miriam laughed. King choked. "You may go, Juanita," he dismissed her. He reached in his pocket for an expensive cigar and lighted up, hiding his scowl behind a rising cloud of smoke.

CHAPTER VII

King Hudson's Daughter

MIRIAM viewed her father tolerantly. More than anyone else, she knew that his growl was worse than his bite. He was like a big boy who loved to push his weight around, and no one, until yesterday, had ever spoken to him as had that stranger Juanita mentioned.

"And where are you going this morning?" he snapped, knowing as he spoke where she would be going.

"To Bueno Padre to do some shopping," she replied, amused.

"And?"

"I expect to ride on to Vanishing Wells and spend the night with Dot Grady. She's due to have her baby soon, you know, and I want to take her some things she'll need."

He chewed on his cigar. "And I suppose you won't be seeing that tinhorn lawyer, Bates?"

Miriam shrugged. "Melvyn's a good lawyer," she defended. "And he's the only man I know who can talk of something other than cows. Not that I don't like horses and cattle and—"

She petered off, and the King hid his eyes with smoke. He knew what she meant. She was the daughter of King Hudson, the wealthy man from the East, and most of the younger men in the valley, while deferential and nice enough, were scared off. Not that Miriam was snobbish, it was who she was that made things difficult for her.

Still, the King didn't like his politics, nor his obsequiousness when they met. He suspected that Bates was Estes' man, and hated the thought that his daughter might consider marrying the man.

"Just the same," he growled, "I don't want you to go down to Vanishing Wells. After what happened yesterday there may be trouble."

"I can take care of myself," Miriam said. She got up abruptly, and King rose to his feet.

"I forbid you going to Vanishing Wells!" he roared.

She came around the table and rumpled his thinning hair. "Woof, woof," she said, and went back into the house while he spluttered and choked and finally threw away his chewed-up cigar.

Miriam had Tony, Juanita's beau, saddle her steel-blue roan, and rode out of the big, well-kept yard. It was a long ride into Bueno Padre, and she knew she would have little time there if she wanted to make Vanishing Wells before night.

The sun was past meridian when she hit the treacherous bog country. Pay-off Creek meandered over its low banks here, spreading its overflow into soft and treacherous ground, making little bogs that were half hidden by foliage that cast its shade over them. Some of them had proved traps for Big Crown cattle, and finally her father had ordered a barbed wire fence thrown around the whole section to keep steers out. However, the trail to Bueno Padre went through this section, and so the men had put a gate in the fence for the convenience of riders.

She dismounted and unlatched the barbed wire gate, led the steeldust through, and carefully closed it behind her. She couldn't see the break in the wire fence, as it went through a thicket some forty feet beyond. Nor was she aware of the presence of the crusty old longhorn, a renegade relic of old stock that had been on the Big Crown ranges when King had taken over.

The mossy-backed steer had come down from the hills, wild as an antelope, and mean as a grizzly. It had lain in the cool

shade after drinking at the nearest bog, and Miriam's entrance roused him. Now he watched her through his small red eyes, his bovine mind debating whether to back away from this intruder, or give fight.

The steeldust was trembling as Miriam mounted, sensing danger in the thicket. The longhorn got to its feet and began to back away. Its bony, matted rump came into contact with several sharp barbs on the broken wire.

THE gashes stung. Bellowing, he came out of the thicket, tossing his needle-sharp horns. The steeldust reared with a frightened snort and Miriam, caught entirely by surprise, slid out of saddle. She fell on her side and rolled over, in time to see the meanest looking steer in the world lower his head and charge.

King Hudson's daughter scrambled to her feet and ran. She didn't bother to see where she was headed; she just ran. Not until she felt water underfoot, and later the soft suck of sandy bottom, did she stop. She was in the middle of an innocent-looking bog, the water barely reaching to her hips.

The bog-wise steer halted abruptly on the edge and slowly drew back. With imminent danger over, Miriam noticed that she was slowly sinking. The sand under her seemed to have no firmness. She tried to reach the opposite bank, but managed only to free one leg from the sticky ooze and place it ahead of her. But her other leg seemed trapped in a spongy vise. She was caught in an awkward position, and floundered in a desperate attempt to free herself. Her efforts pulled her off-balance and she fell face-down in the water. The mud oozed up between her fingers, and she had the horrified vision of being trapped face-down in less than a foot of water.

She managed to straighten, her face stained by the muddy water. She was in up to her middle now, and it was then that she screamed, loud and panic-stricken.

The longhorn wrinkled his nose and bellowed back. She screamed again, not expecting help, but out of sheer terror.

Through the tree-shaded pathway a rider appeared, a tall rider on a golden sorrel that moved with efforless rhythm. The longhorn turned and eyed horse and rider belligerently.

Hatfield took in the situation at one glance with his cool green eyes. He reached for his rope, hanging from his pommel. The outlaw steer, having already chased one human into the bog, lowered his head and began pawing the ground.

"Kinda feeling your oats, eh, old feller!" the Ranger chuckled.

He dropped a short length of the rope in his hand and doubled it so that three feet of doubled rope dangled like a whip from his brown fist. The longhorn charged!

Goldy evaded that rush with the smooth ease of a top cow pony. As the steer lumbered past, Hatfield lashed it sharply across the face. Bellowing, the longhorn plunged ahead. Goldy turned on a dime. A couple more whacks across the bony flanks drove the fight out of the steer's head. Crashing through the thickets, it found the break in the wire and headed for the hills.

Hatfield swung back to the girl. The water was almost up to the swelling of her breasts against the yellow silk blouse. She looked bedraggled and scared, her hair hanging wetly down her cheeks.

He shook out a loop and threw it to her. "Drop it down under your armpits," he directed. "Now take hold of the line with your hands. That's it. Hold tight!"

The girl held on. Slowly, with Goldy's leg muscles bunching, they hauled Miriam Hudson from the bog.

Hatfield dismounted swiftly and went back to where she lay, too exhausted and limp even to sit up. He shook the rope free of her and cradled her in his arms, pushing her hair back from her face with a gentle hand.

"I'm mighty glad I happened along, ma'am," he said.

Reaction set in and Miriam began to

tremble. Her fingers clutched at his strong arm and she buried her face in his coat. After a while the Lone Wolf said softly: "Easy, now. You're all right."

Miriam finally got control of herself. Aided by the Ranger, she got to her feet. She looked at the bog and shuddered. "If you hadn't come along—" Then, turning to look up at her rescuer, her eyes widened. "Why, you must—must be the man from Vanishing Wells," she said in a surprised tone. "The man who so peremptorily ordered my father and his riders home."

HE SMILED, his face sunny and gentle. "And you—you must be King Hudson's daughter."

She nodded. "Other than myself, no one else has ever treated Dad so. Now"—she smiled mischievously—"after seeing you, I can understand it."

He picked up her hat and placed it on her head, tilting the brim down over her eyes in a teasing jerk. "I'll get your horse," he said.

A few minutes later he returned, mounted on Goldy, and leading the steeldust.

She swung up into saddle. "I was headed for Bueno Padre," she explained. "But in this condition—"

"I was riding to see your father," he said gravely.

"Not to order him around again, I hope." Miriam laughed. "I left him in a bearish mood."

He laughed at her. They rode at a clip, the steeldust keeping pace with Goldy's distance-eating lope.

It was late afternoon when they reached the Big Crown.

King was just coming from the bunkhouse, crossing the yard on his way to the ranchhouse, as they turned through the gate and cantered for the tie post in front of the house. He stopped, his face showing his surprise and dismay at Miriam's appearance.

"Dad, this is—"

She turned helplessly to the Ranger, her face flushing.

"Hatfield, Miss Hudson. My friends call me Jim."

"Jim Hatfield, this is my father."

"We've met," King growled. He turned to her, his face worried. "What happened to you, Miriam?"

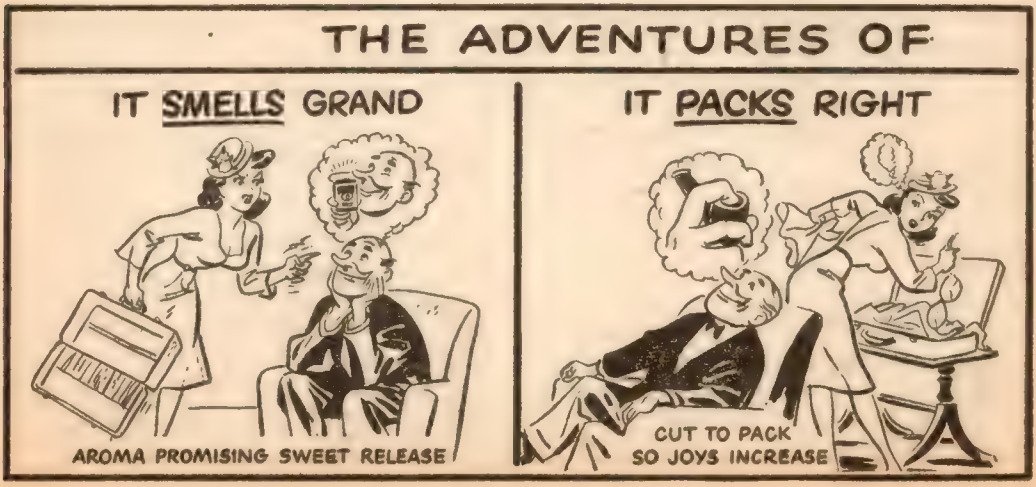
She told him. King turned to Hatfield and held out his hand.

"Looks like I owe you a good deal, Mr. Hatfield."

"I was glad to be of service to a King's daughter," the Lone Wolf said gallantly.

Miriam laughed. "Why don't you two sit on the porch," she suggested, "while I change into something cleaner." She wrinkled her nose. "I must look a sight."

They took her suggestion and she disappeared into the house. Hudson seemed



a little uncomfortable. He had not forgotten yesterday's incident, although in his heart he knew that this tall, direct man had probably saved his life.

"I came to talk to you about Godfrey Brant," Hatfield said bluntly, settling into a porch chair.

Hudson frowned.

"What about Brant?"

"I heard what you told Estes," Hatfield said. "Something about Godfrey threatening you about water."

"He didn't get away with it!" Hudson growled. "I was onto his little game before he was half through. Two weeks ago that was. Came riding down here, bold as you please. Started talking about some scheme to divert the waters of Payoff Creek. I told him to go to hell."

"Maybe he had a good idea," Hatfield suggested. "You should have heard him out."

"I don't deal with Ryan Estes' stooges," Hudson snapped. "Brant bought that worthless spread up in the Mirages from Estes, and he didn't fool me with this talk. He's fronting for Estes in an attempt to blackmail me. I don't blackmail, Mr. Hatfield. I'll ride my men up to Mirage Valley and run him out of the country if he tries anything!"

"Are you sure you haven't already?" Hatfield asked softly.

"What do you mean?"

"Godfrey's gone. From what I can make out he's been gone for some time. He's not at the B-in-a-Box."

"Good riddance," Hudson snarled unsympathetically.

"Good riddance to whom?" Miriam said, coming onto the porch with a pitcher of iced lemonade and glasses on a tray. She set the tray down before them. She had made a quick change to a house dress, combed her hair. She made a pretty and appealing picture.

"No one worth bothering about, Miriam," Hudson growled.

"I'm sorry you feel like that," Hatfield said, unsmiling. He got up. "Godfrey Brant is a friend of mine."

"He's no friend of mine," Hudson answered stiffly.

Miriam said, "Please, Dad—" then looked up at Jim Hatfield.

He smiled. "I must be getting along. Thank you for the lemonade." He looked down at Hudson, who was still frowning. "I hope you're not mixed up with Godfrey's disappearance," he said. He turned and went down the steps to Goldy, touched his hat to the disappointed girl on the porch, and swung into saddle.

Out on the trail, he said to the sorrel, "But I'm not sure of that at all, Goldy. He sure is an ornery-tempered cuss, plumb set in his ways. And if he thought Godfrey was out to get him, I wouldn't put it past him!"

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

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CHAPTER VIII

Trouble at Payoff Creek

THAT night Hatfield camped out on Big Crown range. He had decided to ride back to Vanishing Wells by way of the Padres and Mirage Valley. He wanted to get a good look at the point where Payoff Creek swung away from Brant's valley and came down into this country instead.

He was up early and riding. By midmorning he was high up in the rough country of the Padres. He had followed Payoff Creek until it had flowed into a rocky gorge, then he had to swing away from it. But he kept as close to the rim as the terrain would allow.

He was riding across a granite ridge when he came to the fault in the gorge. A wide canyon cutoff stopped him. Off to his left, hidden behind the lip of the main gorge, the creek roared and boomed. He studied the layout, noticing that this canyon cutoff showed traces of water marks. The stones in its rocky bed were worn smooth.

Some subterranean upheaval, ages ago, must have folded part of the granite floor up into a barrier across the creek channel, diverting over and into the other gorge. The great gray mass of rock hung out over the ancient river bed, like some mammoth table.

The bullet made a sharp, whining sound ricocheting off the rock beside Goldy It left a gray splotch on the hard surface.

Hatfield was sliding down on the off side of Goldy when the second shot came, plucking at the crown of his hat. "Damn good shooting," he muttered. Then Goldy, running like a scared jackrabbit, put a rock outcropping between them and the hidden marksman.

Hatfield didn't pull up until he was well out of range. He debated his next moves for just a moment. He could leave Goldy here and work his way back on foot. But the rifleman had the advantage of being on his guard, and he obviously knew the terrain better than Hatfield. In that case it might take half a day to root him out.

Besides, he had seen what he had come for. Someone else had also realized the possibilities inherent in that overhang, and were guarding its approaches until some opportune time of their own choosing.

The Lone Wolf nodded grimly. "I'll be back, fella," he muttered, and turned Goldy away.

Two hours later the ancient river bed funneled him into Mirage Valley. One of Taylor's windmills creaked thinly in the small breeze, its pump bringing up a trickle of water that dripped into a small wooden trough. Two half-wild steers with Godfrey's B-in-a-Box iron on their hides were muzzling the trough.

He rode past, heading for the ranch. When it came into view he was surprised to notice the faint trace of smoke coming from the chimney.

"If that dirty-faced hombre tells me again he's Godfrey, this time we'll go round and round, Goldy," he growled.

He rode on into yard, his coat open, giving him easy access to the twin Colts riding his hips. He dismounted in the yard and looked toward the house.

A young man with a determined frown came through the door, holding a rifle as though he knew how to use it. This stranger said, "Looking for someone, fella?"

Hatfield said, "Yeah—a man named Godfrey Brant."

The young fellow's eyes hardened. "What for?"

Hatfield looked at the rifle. "Put that thing down and I'll tell you."

"My name's Jeff Brant," the rifle bearer said grimly. "I belong here. You talk, and then if what you say satisfies me, I'll put this thing down."

Hatfield grinned. "You sound like an ex-Ranger's son, at that. My name's Jim Hatfield."

Jeff frowned. "Seems I heard that name before."

"If you're Godfrey's boy, you probably have," Jim retorted. He walked across the yard, Goldy following docilely behind him.

Jeff said harshly, "If you're a friend of my father's, prove it!"

JIM HATFIELD halted. There was something about this young fellow he liked, and he felt he was telling the truth. He decided to take the chance. Slowly, so as not to give the other wrong ideas of what he was doing, he took the silver Ranger badge from the secret pocket in his belt.

"Ranger Jim Hatfield," he revealed, holding the glinting, circled star up for Jeff to see. "Your father wrote to Captain McDowell for help. I came to see what I could do."

"Hatfield! I remember now! My father used to write a lot about you. You're the Lone Wolf!" Admiration shone over Jeff's face. "And to think I held a rifle on you!"

"Other men have tried it before," Hatfield said quietly.

Jeff dropped his rifle under his arm. "Come in! Coffee's on."

Jim Hatfield followed young Brant inside the house. Jeff had cleaned up. There was a pot on the stove and a wood fire burning, which explained the smoke he had seen.

Jeff brought out two cups and offered the Ranger a tailored cigarette. "You'll spoil me, Jeff," he chuckled. And Jeff grinned with him.

"I'm worried," he said as he poured out the coffee. "Dad wrote me to come right away. I had an offer of a job with the Mason Construction Company, a big Con-

A TALL TEXAS TALE

TALKING ABOUT STRONG MEN—

AMOS DIBBLE said, "Strongest man I ever did see was a gent up in Colorado one time. Had him a brim-full load of silver ore on one of them big ore wagons, and when he gets stuck in the mud so tight his four mules won't budge that wagon even a mite, he just up and crawls under the axle, balances it just right on his neck and shoulders, and lifts the whole rear end of it over onto dry land."

"Talking Tom!" Truesdale scowled thoughtfully. "Seems as if you ain't never heard of my Grandpappy Truesdale from down in the Big Bend country, or you wouldn't go bragging about no such small potatoes as lifting a little ore wagon. 'Course it wasn't called the Big Bend country till after Grandpappy got there and put that there crimp in the Rio Grande to suit himself. He just simply didn't like straight rivers.

"You take the Texas Longhorn, for instance. That's a breed come out of Grandpappy's own strength and brains. They was mere ordinary horned cattle till Grandpappy got tired of 'em poking their heads into his feed shed one day. Yessir, he just went through his herd and stretched out every one of their horns so's they couldn't get their heads through the door of that old feed shed of his'n."

Amos Dibble grinned. "Strong as he was, what ever kilt him anyway? Or did he just natural die of old age?"

"Nope, Grandpappy died in a fight. Got broke right in two by a feller even stronger'n him. He'd of prob'ly give a better account of himself if it wasn't for the mountain he tipped over on himself by accident a couple days previous. I ain't so sure, though, because Grandpappy was really a Easterner come West, a Kentuckian, and this here other feller was born and raised in Texas."

cern in New Haven, Connecticut. But I turned it down. I hadn't seen Dad in nearly eight years."

Hatfield told him what he knew of his father's disappearance. Jeff bit his lips. "Something's happened to Dad! He wouldn't just ride off, knowing I was on my way here."

Hatfield frowned. "It's possible that Hudson may have something to do with it, Jeff. On the other hand, I don't like the way Estes figgers into this." He shook his head. "We're stymied here until we can force out into the open the hand of the man behind your father's disappearance." He got up and tossed his butt into the stove. When he turned, he said, "Maybe there's one way we can do it, Jeff. Listen close."

Jeff nodded. "I'll do it," he said when the Ranger had talked for a few moments. He got up and walked to the small pantry. "You must be pretty hungry, Hatfield. Sit awhile, and I'll rustle up some grub." He grinned cheerfully. "You see I've absorbed some of Dad's lingo through his letters."

Jim Hatfield settled back in his chair. "We'll make a Westerner out of you yet."

When the Ranger was ready to go, Jeff walked out to the porch with him. "I'll be following you in an hour," he promised. "Good riding."

Hatfield waved his hat. *"Hasta la vista,* Jeff. . . ."

Where the red cliffs began their step-back climb from the entrance to Mirage Canyon, a small, ferret-faced man with a Chinese dragon tattooed on his left wrist was perched on a ledge a hundred feet from the canyon floor. Butting out his tenth cigarette, he cursed silently. He had been keeping vigil here since early morning, and hunger and indecision gnawed at his lean stomach.

He had a Winchester on the rock beside him, and his position had been carefully chosen so that he had a clear view of both the Mirage Canyon trail and the stage road that here swung in close to the towering cliffs before starting its wide swing east and eventually negotiating the lower ridges and down into Payoff Valley.

He had strict orders to remain until the tall interloper who had killed Steve Gundar returned. And there was a bonus of five hundred dollars waiting for him when this job was done.

The Ferret, as he was familiarly known, had made a comfortable living doing jobs of this nature, and only the waiting irritated him. With the sun beginning to slide down the side of the western sky, he hunkered down on his runover heels and began fashioning another cigarette. . . .

THE Lone Wolf let Goldy pick his own pace down Mirage Canyon. His thoughts had wandered back to Miriam Hudson, and he chuckled as he recalled the mental image of her as she had been when he had pulled her from the bog. "She's a thoroughbred, Goldy. Too bad her father has to be such an ornery cuss."

The sorrel's ears waggled in approval.

"Now if this gal and young Brant—" He pulled up suddenly, forgetting both Jeff and Miriam. The canyon walls seemed to be shimmering before him. "Whoa!" he said in amazement.

A strange mirage was forming in the pocket ahead of him. It was a double image, the bottom half an inverted replica of the scene above.

The men were riding toward a clump of granite spars that thrust upward like tombstones. Two of them resembled the hardcases he had encountered on his first visit to the B-in-a-Box. He recognized the slovenly leader who had said he was Godfrey Brant. The middle rider, slumped tiredly in saddle, had his hands tied behind his back. He was a stocky man in his early fifties, perhaps, and though his hair was thinning, it was still a peppery brown.

Hatfield studied that fantastic mirage. There was a shack in a small amphitheatre among the rocks, toward which the men were riding. The granite spars were like fingers sticking up into the sky. One of them in particular caught Hatfield's rapt attention. Wind and weather had com-

bined in freakish sculpture to fashion a rude cross on the top of one of the pinnacles.

The three riders reached the shack. The two men dismounted and hauled the other down. As they started for the shack the scene dissolved, shimmered into nothingness, leaving the colored walls of Mirage Canyon stark against the sky.

Hatfield shook his head wonderingly. "Goldy, that wouldn't happen again in a thousand years. But I'll swear that was Godfrey Brant those jaspers took to that shack!"

He had to know. He'd wait for Jeff in town, and have young Brant describe his father. Better still, he'd check with Miller. The lawman knew Godfrey.

He started Goldy into a run.

He was coming down the last stretch of the canyon trail where the walls gave way abruptly to the level flatness of the semi desert, when he saw a horseman appear on the stage road ahead. He drew up sharply, scanning the figure with keen gaze.

"Well!" He grinned. "The King's daughter. Let's catch up with her, Goldy!"

Goldy leaped ahead at the touch of his rider's heels. And that sudden start saved Hatfield's life.

A bullet made a high whine past his head. Hatfield slid sideward and down alongside Goldy's glistening barrel, Indian style, slipping his rifle free as he did. The Ferret's second shot took a bit of cloth from the Ranger's shoulder.

The Ferret stood up for a better shot, cursing grimly. He hadn't seen the girl coming down the stage road, his attention having been focused on Hatfield. Now her sudden scream as she saw him, startled him. He swung around and fired down at her without even taking time to see who it was.

His slug burned a path across the steeldust's rump. The animal's front legs went up into the air, then its hind legs, and Miriam Hudson left the saddle. She landed on her hands and knees in the middle of the road and the impact stunned her.

The Lone Wolf slid back into saddle and straightened in his stirrups, a cold fury working his arm. Although he didn't know the ambusher, the man was in plain sight on the ledge above, and he slammed a shot into the small figure before the man could duck back out of sight. He saw the fellow jerk at the impact of the .30-caliber slug, and pulled trigger again. The Ferret doubled. His rifle slid from his relaxing fingers and came clattering down the cliffside. He followed it, dropping limply, to bounce like a rag doll on the debris below.

HATFIELD raced the sorrel past the body, throwing only a cursory glance at the killer. He slid out of saddle by Miriam's side.

The girl was sitting up. The fall had jarred her, but otherwise she was unhurt.

Hatfield helped her to her feet, relieved to find her unharmed. "Well, well," he gibed gently. "Can't you stay on a horse, Miss Hudson?"

She was still shaken, however. "I—I saw that man on the cliff and when he fired at me, my horse pitched." She reddened. "This hasn't happened to me in ten years, Mr. Hatfield, believe me."

"I do." He smiled. "I'll round up your horse. We may as well ride together."

When she had mounted, she asked hesitantly, "That man who tried to kill you—"

"Will not be ambushing anyone else," Hatfield answered grimly.

She made no further comment until they came into sight of Vanishing Wells. "My father will be furious," she said then, "when he finds I've disobeyed him and come here."

Jim Hatfield shrugged. "After what happened, I don't know as I blame him."

CHAPTER IX

"Find My Father!"

KING HUDSON'S pretty daughter and the tall stranger who had created such a stir in Vanishing Wells, rode

into town together. Estes saw them ride down Mesa Boulevard and cursed softly as he went back into the Casino.

Miriam Hudson had turned in to the rack in front of Alpert's Mercantile, with Hatfield beside her, when Melvyn Bates came up to greet her. He was neatly groomed, and when he doffed his hat Hatfield noticed his hair was neatly slicked down. "Good morning, Miss Hudson. Morning, Mr. Hatfield."

Miriam looked at them with some surprise. "I see you two have met."

Hatfield nodded. His eyes were probing Bates' face. "We discussed legal matters," he explained shortly.

Bates was obviously uncomfortable and displeased that Miriam had ridden in with the Ranger. "Sorry about what happened last night, Mr. Hatfield," he said. He didn't mean it, and it showed in his voice. "I was pretty lucky myself. If I had lingered in that doorway a moment later I might have received that bullet."

"I doubt it," Hatfield said bluntly.

Bates bristled. "You don't mean—"

"Anything I can't prove," Hatfield finished thinly. "Hope you have a pleasant visit, Miss Hudson." He touched his hat. His dismissal of Bates was obvious, and the lawyer flushed.

Miriam looked after Hatfield's departing figure with growing curiosity. "He doesn't like you, does he?"

Bates shrugged. "Some hardcase passing himself off as a gentleman." He told her what had happened in the lunchroom. "Obviously he thinks I may have had something to do with his getting shot at."

Miriam looked closely at this man, noticing for the first time the ruthless set of his mouh. And she felt a twinge of doubt. "Did you?" she asked bluntly.

"Now, Miss Hudson!" He flushed.

"I think I'll go now," Miriam said abruptly.

Bates moved up beside her. "May I have the pleasure of seeing you while you stay in town? Go riding, perhaps?"

"I—I don't think so," she said, and wasn't quite sure why she turned him down. She had found his company pleasurable before.

Bates stammered, "But—but I thought—"

"Good day, Mr. Bates," she said, and went on into the store. . . .

Jeff Brant came riding into Vanishing Wells an hour later. He came into town packing the Ferret's body across his saddle. Some of the citizens followed him down the street to the jail office.

Miller listened to his terse explanation. "Say it again—slow!"

"He was lying at the foot of the cliff, at the entrance to the canyon trail," Jeff said evenly. "Looked like he'd been shot off one of the ledges. His rifle was down beside him."

Miller was angry. "Shootings! Bodies! Things haven't been the same around here since that tall hombre came to town!"

Estes pushed through the crowd that had collected around Jeff and the lawman. Bates was at his heels.

"What's going on, Miller?" he asked authoritatively. "Who's been shot?"

"The Ferret!" Miller snapped. "Looks like he was just a mite too careless in his potshooting this time!"

Estes' usually bland face was grim. "Who's this?" he rasped, jerking a thumb at Jeff.

Jeff eyed him with an amused grin. "Name's Jeffrey Brant."

"Godfrey's boy?"

Jeff nodded. "I rode in to tell you I'm taking over the B-in-a-Box, Deputy Miller. Until my father either shows up, or his body is found."

"Wait a minute, young fellow!" Estes snapped. "Godfrey's a friend of mine." He turned to the deputy. "Are you sure this is Godfrey's boy?"

"He produced enough evidence to suit me!" Miller snapped.

Estes looked Jeff over. "Well, it's too bad I have to break the bad news to you now, son," he said thinly.

"What bad news?"

ESTES didn't answer right away. He turned to the lawyer standing slightly behind him. "Bates, get that bill of sale

from your office."

Miller was suspicious. "What you driving at, Ryan?"

The Casino owner shrugged. "I didn't want to bring this out right away. Not until Godfrey either turned up or, if he has been killed, his body is found. I knew if I showed his bill of sale around, I'd be accused of being responsible for his disappearance."

They waited until Bates showed up, a folder tucked under his arm. Miller looked at Jeff's grim face. "Maybe we'd better talk this over inside my office."

They followed him into his cubicle and Miller closed the door on disappointed faces. He looked at Estes. "Now let's hear what you're talkin' about," he snapped.

Ryan Estes took the folder from Bates and extracted a sheet of paper from it. "Two weeks ago I went up to see how Godfrey was getting along"" he explained. "I found him discouraged. We had words and he claimed I had tricked him into buying the place when I knew it was worthless. I offered to buy the place from him. He jumped at the chance. I rode back to get Bates and next day we closed the deal. I gave him five thousand, cash, for the B-in-a-Box."

Jeff was grimly suspicious. "Let me see that bill of sale!"

Estes placed the paper on the deputy's desk. "Keep your hands off it while you read!" he warned harshly.

It was a legal paper, all right, witnessed by Bates and Lepage. Godfrey Brant's signature was attached to it.

Miller glanced at Jeff. "That your father's handwriting?"

Jeff nodded, tight-lipped. "Looks like it."

Estes sneered. "That's Godfrey's signature, all right. You can compare it with any other document with his name on it. This paper'll stand up in any court."

"Like hell it will!" Jeff said angrily. "How do I know you didn't force my father to sign this? Those witnesses don't mean anything. Obviously they are your men!"

"That," Melvyn Bates said loudly, "is a lie! I will swear to the legality of this paper in any courtroom."

Jeff turned back to the lawman. "Funny, ain't it, Miller, that no one has seen my father since that day he presumably sold out to this gentleman!"

Estes' voice was icily smooth. "I told you he said he wanted to clear out. Then again, he had five thousand in cash on him. Someone else may have got wind of it and—"

"That's too pat," Jeff snarled. "Maybe you can make that paper stand up in a court of law, Mr. Estes. But you're going to have to run me off the B-in-a-Box. I'm staying!"

"I'll give you until the end of the week to clear out," Estes countered coldly. "If you insist on your foolish stand, then we'll have to kill you!" He turned and put the bill of sale in his pocket. "Good day, Mr. Brandt."

Miller walked to a chair and sat down. "Looks like he holds the joker, son."

Jeff shook his head. "I'm not giving up the B-in-a-Box that easily, Miller. I'm going to find my father—or his body!"

He stamped out of the office and turned down the walk, still too angry to notice where he was going. A girl stepped out of the store before him and he collided with her. She staggered, and dropped one of her purchases, and turned on him, her face an angry red. "Well, do you always stomp your way down the walk, young man?"

He smiled at her flushed face. "I'm sorry, miss. I should have been looking where I was going." Then, noticing that the package had come undone, he bent down to pick it up for her. A pair of tiny shoes had fallen out and he picked them up and grinned as he held them out to her. "I hope the little one is a boy, ma'am," he said respectfully.

MIRIAM HUDSON gasped. "These are not—for me. They're for a friend of mine who—"

"I'm glad to hear that," Jeff said, grinning. "My name's Jeff Brant."

"Godfrey Brant's son?" Miriam asked,

still feeling flushed. His easy manner disturbed her, caused a strange flutter inside her she couldn't still.

He nodded. "You know my father?"

"Not too well, I'm afraid," she answered, getting control of herself. "He had some trouble with Dad. I'm Miriam Hudson, King Hudson's daughter."

"The King's daughter," Jeff said, his grin matching the light in his eyes. "May I call you Princess?"

She laughed. "If you wish, Mr. Brant."

"I'm Jeff," he said. "Back in school they used to call me Fadeaway Brant."

Miriam found herself enjoying this. She was also conscious that Melvyn Bates was watching them from his office. "You look substantial enough, Jeff. Why the nickname?"

"Oh, I was on the school track team. Had a habit of making a last sprint in the half mile." He helped her with her packages. "May I see you again, Miss Hudson?"

"Princess?" she teased.

He nodded.

"I'm riding home, by way of Bueno Padre, tomorrow morning," she suggested.

He touched his hat. "I'll ride with you, then."

He watched her go down the walk, feeling strangely elated for a man who had just lost a ranch. "Nice country," he said to himself, and he was whistling by time he reached the Mirage Hotel.

Hatfield was waiting for him in the lobby. Jeff followed him to his room upstairs and watched while the Ranger went to the window and drew the shade. The sun had gone down behind the Mirages and the purple dusk was a fluid thing, seeping over the dingy skyline of Vanishing Wells.

Hatfield listened quietly as Jeff recounted Estes' move. "It worked." He nodded thoughtfully. "It brought the wolves out into the open. There's no longer any doubt who's behind your father's disappearance. And it's a cinch your dad didn't willingly sign away title to the B-in-a-Box!"

"I know he didn't!" Jeff said angrily. "But proving it in court is another story!"

Hatfield said, "I've got a hunch your father is still alive—and that I know where he is." He explained the mirage he had witnessed in Mirage Canyon, and he carefully described the captive he had seen being taken to the shack.

"Sure, that's Dad!" Jeff affirmed excitedly. "They must have got scared when you showed up looking for him, and moved him somewhere else. But where?" He shook his head. "There's a lot of country around here. Those rocks you saw could be anywhere."

"They're a pretty unusual formation," Hatfield said, frowning. "Someone in town may be able to help us." Then he shook his head. "It's got to be someone we can trust, though. If we asked the wrong man, and it got to Estes' ears that we were asking, we'd never find your father alive."

Jeff paced the small room. "Estes has us licked with that bill of sale. With Lepage and that lawyer Bates swearing to the sale, they can make it hold water in any court. We've got to find my father!"

"We'll start on that in the morning," Hatfield growled.

CHAPTER X

Fight in the Tombstones

YOUNG Brant and Jim Hatfield overtook Miriam Hudson on the stage road just outside Vanishing Wells. They had left the hotel early, picked up breakfast in the same lunchroom where the Ranger had been shot at, and headed for Miller's office. But Miller was either still asleep, or he was out, so Hatfield had decided to ride with Jeff to the B-in-a-Box and start their search from there.

Jeff had forgotten about riding with Miriam, but sight of that trim figure on the road ahead sent a pleasurable anticipation through him.

Miriam looked back and reined aside as they approached, her smile touched with surprise.

"I didn't know you knew each other," she greeted.

Jeff looked quickly at Hatfield, who nodded gravely. "We met yesterday, Miss Hudson. You get around some yourself, I see."

Miriam smiled again. "Perhaps too much, I'm afraid. My father has always worried about my riding. But I've never been afraid. I love this country, and I love to ride."

Jeff said to Hatfield, "Maybe Miss Hudson would recognize those rocks you saw in that mirage."

Miriam was immediately curious. "What rocks? "

Hatfield explained. He described in detail the place he had seen in the mirage, and added, "We're sure the man they brought to that shack must be Godfrey Brant. The two men with him must be toughs hired by Ryan Estes. I recognized both as two of the men I had seen at the B-in-a-Box the other day."

"I'm glad my father isn't mixed up with this," Miriam said, relieved. "After what you said yesterday, I—"

"I wasn't sure, until today," Hatfield said gently. "In town here Estes was known as a friend of Godfrey's, whereas your father made no secret of the way he felt about him."

Miriam said, "I understand. And I'm glad I can help. I think I know the place you've described. I've done a lot of riding around this country in the past few years. I'd say those were the Tombstones. They're a bunch of granite spars that dot the country down in the bad lands east of the Padres. A long ride from here."

"Think you can direct us to it?" Hatfield asked.

"I can lead you to it," the girl insisted. She saw the look Jeff shot at the Ranger and repeated stubbornly, "I'll not be left out of this. It's the least I can do, and I promise to be no trouble."

Hatfield glanced at Jeff and saw no opposition to Miriam there. He shrugged, knowing better than to argue with a woman when she took a stand as Miriam was doing.

Late in the afternoon they halted on the edge of a rock-strewn slope that looked down on the badlands. The "tombstones" dotted the slope below them, several square miles of fantastic rock fingers that gave the aspect of a graveyard to the country below.

The Lone Wolf studied the rocks. This was the scene he had seen in that strange mirage, these were the rocks into which Godfrey had been taken. He reached inside Goldy's saddle-bag and brought out a pair of strong field-glasses.

Jeff said anxiously, "It won't be easy to ride down on them without being spotted. And if they see us—"

Hatfield shrugged. He had picked out the rock with the cross-shaped top, marked its location in his mind. "They won't!" he said grimly. He replaced the field-glasses in the saddle-bag and slipped his rifle from his saddle-boot.

"Take care of Miriam," he told Jeff.

Jeff was reaching for his rifle. "I'm coming with you!" he protested.

Hatfield shook his head. "Stay here with her. Just in case someone we don't expect shows up."

"There's two of them down there with my father," Jeff argued. "I can't let you go alone."

But Hatfield was already gone, slipping down that rock-strewn slope with the lithe grace of a stalking Apache. Jeff turned helplessly to Miriam Hudson. "What can you do with a man like that?"

"Like him," Miriam answered softly. She was staring down the slope where Hatfield had disappeared, her eyes shining. . . .

MATT MAYES, the chunky man who had passed himself off as Godfrey Brant, flung his card hand against the cabin wall and stood up, his impatience breaking into unchecked curses. Turning, he snarled at the limp figure of Godfrey Brant, lying on a cot against the far wall.

"If we don't get the word today, I'm going to dump him, Lefty," he said savagely. "I didn't hire to play watchdog over this old coot!"

Lefty Allen, the other hired gunslinger shrugged. He was a skinny, untalkative man who had grown up in an outlaw camp and had followed that way of life as a matter of course. "They told us to move him out here and wait for further orders. Far as I'm concerned, that's what I'm getting paid for."

Mayes kicked a box out of his path. He walked to the cot where Godfrey lay with his back to them. Godfrey's temple had a nasty gash which had bled a lot, staining his face and his shirt. He was breathing raggedly, his face pale and gaunt under a week's stubble.

He had made a break for it this morning, right after they had untied him to let him eat, and Mayes had laid the side of his Colt across his head.

"Probably cracked his skull!" Lefty had said unsympathetically.

Mayes pulled Godfrey over on his back. The ex-Ranger's eyes flickered open. He tried to sit up, his lips moving. "Damn your stinking hides!" he gasped. "You'll pay for this!"

Mayes shoved him roughly against the wall. He walked to the door and slammed it open, venting his displeasure in physical violence. He stood in the doorway, staring at the bright sun on the high rock shafts enclosing the small clearing. Lefty got up and methidically began picking up the cards which Mayes had slammed on the floor.

A shadow slipped between two rock columns. Mayes eyes caught a glimpse of the man and went suddenly alert, flinging his unfinished cigarette to one side in a rapid gesture.

"That you, Deacon?" he called.

The shadow reappeared, this time stepping boldly out into the clearing. Mayes had a good look at the tall, broad-shouldered man and swore as he reached for his Colt.

"Lefty!" he yelled in alarm. He was jumping back for the protection of the cabin interior, his Colt lifting clear of his holster when a rifle slug cuffed him roughly against the door jamb.

Lefty reached the door with drawn Colt. He got a good look at a pair of green eyes over a rifle muzzle—and it was his last look at anything on earth. He fired twice —the first slug kicking up dirt in front of his boots, the second screaming skyward as his knees buckled and his Colt tilted upyard.

He fell sideward against Mayes, partially blocking the doorway. Mayes was already dead.

Hatfield stepped past them. He found Godfrey Brant stirring on the cot. The man was in a daze. He tried to fight Hatfield off, and didn't seem to understand when the Ranger told him who he was.

Jim Hatfield quit talking. Brant weighed all of one-eighty, but he hefted the man easily on one shoulder and left the shack. He found three horses picketed behind the cabin and mounted one with Godfrey Brant across the saddle.

The sun streamed brightly into that clearing as he rode away, reflecting from Matt Mayes' wide, staring eyes.

Twenty minutes later Hatfield rode up the slope where he had left the others. Jeff came running to meet him, his strained face breaking with relief. Hatfield dismounted and eased the ex-Ranger down.

"This your father, Jeff?"

Jeff nodded, a lump in his throat. Miriam knelt beside the barely conscious man. "He's hurt," she said. "He needs the attention of a doctor."

Godfrey's eyes flickered. He stared up into Jeff's concerned face, and recognition eased the pain lines around his mouth. "Jeff—my boy—"

Hatfield said gently, "He'll have to be taken to the B-in-a-Box. It's nearer than Vanishing Wells, and he can't stand a long ride, Jeff. You and Miriam take care of him while I head for town and get a doctor. With Goldy under me, I should be joining you at the B-in-a-Box by tomorrow evening."

GODFREY reached up a hand for Jim Hatfield's. "You're the Lone Wolf!" he said. "I was hoping McDowell would send you." He tried to raise up. "I wrote Bill I'd—"

Hatfield. "Rest easy, Godfrey. I'll see you later, when you're stronger."

Godfrey's voice was laced with fight. "Get Miller, too. There's things I want to tell him—about Payoff Creek. About Estes' plan to ruin the Big Crown." He swore weakly. "If that mule-headed jackass at the Big Crown had listened to me when I rode down to see him—"

Miriam colored. Jeff put a hand on his father's shoulder.

"This is King Hudson's daughter, Dad," he said. "If it hadn't been for her we might never have found you."

Godfrey turned his gaze to the girl. "Begging your pardon, miss, but your father is a mule-headed—" He eased back, his anger spent. "Get Miller, Jim," he said to the Ranger. "There's dynamite under Table Rock, and two of Estes' men guarding it."

Hatfield nodded as he swung up on Goldy. "I'll get him. Rest easy, Godfrey. . . ."

The Deacon arrived in Vanishing Wells the next morning. He rode in slouched in saddle, a nondescript man in dusty black garb; a man who might have passed for some range tramp. The Deacon cared little for looks, nor was he overly concerned with a gunman's pride, as Steve Gundar had been. He was a cold-blooded professional whose .45 was for hire, and he had sharpened that skill much as any man in a less grim business tries to sharpen his ability in his particular field of endeavor.

They said many things of the Deacon. That he was an unfrocked minister. That he had been a respectable man until the night he killed his wife and her lover. But they were stories that were whispered—no one knew the truth, not even Estes. And no one had ever been intimate enough with the Deacon to ask about his past.

He reined in before the Casino, tied up at the rail, and went inside, walking down the empty barroom to the door marked "PRIVATE." Estes was behind his desk, waiting for him. A half-dozen hardcases were standing along the wall, evidently having been called in for a pow-wow.

Ryan Estes nodded with relief when the Deacon came in. He got up and held out the box of cigars he'd had on his desk. Sellars took two, dropped one into his shirt pocket, and stuck the other in his mouth. He did not immediately light it.

Estes had not passed the cigar box to any of the others in the room. He dropped the box on his desk and sat down, looking up at the Deacon.

"You know about Steve?" he asked.

The Deacon nodded. He never mingled with any of the other gunmen, and he stood apart now, while the lesser toughs fidgeted uneasily. None of them ever felt comfortable with this sad-faced man around.

Estes ran over what had happened in quick, harsh tones. "That's the whole of it, Deacon. This hombre comes to Vanishing Wells and in three days he's put Joe out of commission, killed Steve and the Ferret and"—his lips curled as he glanced at the men against the wall—"scared hell out of the rest of the boys!"

Bert Lepage shifted uneasily. "He ees one bad hombre, thees man, Deacon. I saw heem when he heet Steve."

"Who is he?" the Deacon asked tonelessly.

"The name on the hotel register is Hatfield—Jim Hatfield."

The Deacon stirred then. His eyes widened a trifle, and a strange look hung briefly in their pale depths. Then it was gone and his eyes were sad again, with no other expression. "Hatfield!" he murmured. "He must be the man!"

Estes frowned. "Who is he, Deacon? Someone you know?"

"Not socially," the Deacon replied drily. "But he must be that Ranger they call the Lone Wolf." His smile was a slow, wry thing. "I've been wanting to meet up with him a long time, Ryan. For personal reasons."

Estes had slumped back in his chair, his jaw slack. *"The Lone Wolf!"* He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his brow. "That explains a lot of things, Deacon."

The gunman shrugged. "You sent for me, Ryan. To do a job. This one I'll do for nothing."

CHAPTER XI

Gunslinger Finish

RYAN ESTES stared. This was the Deacon. Hell, not even the Rangers could stop this man! The thought was in him, reassuring him. He licked dry lips.

"I'm not waiting, Deacon. I called you to town because Hatfield'll be coming back here. But the boys and I are leaving, right now. I'm riding to Table Rock and setting off that charge that's going to break King Hudson. And we'll leave Godfrey Brant's body around so that the blast will be laid to him." His face twisted with a deep, undying hate. "I'll have the Mirage Ranch, Deacon—and if it's the last thing I do I'm going to ruin the King!"

The Deacon took a match from his pocket and lighted his cigar. His face showed nothing in the strong flare.

"You can forget Hatfield," he assured. "I'll be here when he comes!"

Hatfield came to Vanishing Wells before noon. Miller intercepted him before he turned Goldy down Mesa Boulevard. The lawman came limping toward him, his worried face drawn taut.

"The Deacon's in town!" he cried as the Ranger pulled up. "He's waiting for you in Mirage Square!"

Hatfield grinned. "You look worried, Miller."

Miller's lips pulled back against his teeth. "That's the Deacon, man!" he said jerkily. "He's not like the others. He's—"

Hatfield reached inside the secret pocket of his belt for his Texas Ranger badge. "I'm Ranger Jim Hatfield!" he said quietly, holding the badge out for Miller to see.

Miller's eyes widened at that silver symbol of law and order throughout Texas. "Hatfield—the Lone Wolf!"

Hatfield nodded. "If there's a doctor in town, get him ready to travel."

"Doc?" Miller mumbled. "For who?"

"Godfrey Brant. He should be at the B-in-a-Box by now. He's hurt."

Miller stumbled after him as he turned away. "When did you see Godfrey?" he asked. "How did he get hurt?"

"I'll tell you about it later," Hatfield answered grimly. "After I see the Deacon!"

Miller halted in the street, Goldy's reins loose in his hand. He saw the Ranger reach the corner of Mesa Boulevard and turn toward Mirage Square. Where the Deacon was waiting. And only then did the lawman notice the cold sweat coming down his furrowed cheeks.

The Deacon was sitting on the edge of the boardwalk in front of the Casino when Hatfield rounded the corner of Mesa Boulevard. He was leaning against one of the awning supports, a nondescript figure of a man whittling on a piece of pine wood.

Hatfield walked halfway down to the square before the Deacon got to his feet. The outlaw got up without hurry, tossing the wood aside with a careless gesture, and faced the tall man coming to meet him. He didn't move. He watched without particular interest.

Hatfield noticed the laxness in the man and a touch of respect found a spot in him. This man lived up to his reputation. No false bluster, no loud words. The Deacon was waiting for him—and there was no need to yell out why.

The Deacon kept his silence until Hatfield was within twenty feet of him. Then he looked squarely into the Lone Wolf's greenish eyes and smiled coldly. "It was a long wait, Hatfield!"

No other warning. Just those six words, and then a blur of movement as the Deacon struck for his guns in the fastest move of his life! At that he got his guns clear

of leather. His first bullet kicked up dirt at the Lone Wolf's feet—and that was the only bullet he fired.

He seemed to fold inward, gently, as Hatfield's slugs smashed into his stomach, four inches above his belt buckle. For a brief instant his pale eyes registered shock, a vast surprise, a dawning unbelief. Then they rolled upward until only the yellowish whites showed, and he fell in a loosely curled heap in the dust by the Casino.

HATFIELD walked slowly up and looked down on the Deacon, his Colt still smoking in his fist. "You were good, Deacon," he said with grudging admiration. Then he turned away, ignoring the stunned and silent witnesses beginning to edge into the square.

Miller was waiting for him at the beginning of Mesa Boulevard. Hatfield could see the shock in the lawman's eyes. It would be a while yet before Miller could believe what he had just seen.

"Where's Estes?" Hatfield asked grimly.

"Rode out a few hours ago," Miller answered slowly, his mind only half on the question. "Took a half-dozen of his gunnies with him, and Melvyn Bates. They were headed for Mirage Valley."

Hatfield tensed. "We've got to stop them, Miller! Miss Hudson and Jeff are up there now, with Godfrey! If those wolves break in on them, they'll try to finish the job they started with Godfrey!"

Miller snapped out of it. "I'll get saddled right away! And try to round up some kind of a posse. We'll need every gun we can get." He swung around, his eyes shuttling to the group of riders who came pounding around the corner into Mesa Boulevard. A big group led by a determined King Hudson!

Hatfield suddenly chuckled. "Looks like there's our posse, Miller. And just in time!"

King Hudson pulled up before Hatfield and the lawman. He was grim and anxious-faced, and the riders behind him were armed and serious.

"Miller!" he rasped harshly. "Keep out of this! I'm not turning back this time not for you nor"—he looked at Hatfield, his lips thinning to hard, bloodless line—"for anyone else who thinks he can horn in. I've come to finish a job I started in Bueno Padre, when I ran that mangy polecat out on a rail!"

"Keep your shirt on, King!" Miller interrupted coldly. "Estes ain't in town!"

The King leaned forward in his saddle. "Maybe he isn't in town, Miller!" he snapped. "But he knows what's happened to my daughter. She didn't get home last night, and I dropped by the Grady house to see if she was still there. Dorothy said Miriam left there yesterday morning to come home." The King's face was dark with long-held rage. "Damn it, Miller, this time that tinhorn's gone too far!"

"I said keep your shirt on!" Miller interrupted again. "Estes hasn't bothered your daughter."

"You—" Hudson was livid.

"Miller's talking sense, King," Hatfield cut in quietly. "Your daughter's all right. Nothing's happened to her—yet! But if we stand here wasting more time, something may happen."

"Where is she?" King demanded harshly, swinging on the Lone Wolf.

"At the B-in-a-Box by now, I reckon," Hatfield replied. "With Godfrey Brant, and his son, Jeff."

The King spluttered. "And you say she's all right! You mean she was kidnaped! I'll have Godfrey strung—"

"Shut up!" Hatfield cut in grimly. "And for once in your life, listen! Listen to what I have to say before you start throwing your weight around!"

"Who in hell are you?" Hudson snapped angrily.

Hatfield showed him his silver star, backed by the authority of the State of Texas. "Jim Hatfield!" he answered. "Texas Ranger."

Hudson stiffened. Behind him one of the Big Crown riders murmured, "The Lone Wolf!"

There wasn't a man there who hadn't heard of the legendary exploits of this tall, green-eyed man now standing grim-

faced before them. And there was awe in their faces.

Miller was grinning at the look on King Hudson's face. The big man had settled back in saddle, the wind taken out him.

"That's right," the deputy said flatly. "And Hatfield's taking charge here. He just killed the Deacon—in an even break! You hear that, King? The Deacon's body is lying out in front of the Casino, in case you don't believe me!"

KING HUDSON nodded dumbly.

Hatfield's grimness relented a little. "If you had listened to Godfrey, that day he came to see you, instead of jumping to conclusions, you could have saved everyone around here a lot of grief. As it turned out, Estes got wind of what Godfrey discovered up at Payoff Gorge—mainly a way of dynamiting Table Rock so that Payoff Creek would be diverted back into its old stream running through Mirage Valley.

"Godfrey didn't want to do it that way," Hatfield continued. "That's what he wrote to his son, who had just received an engineering degree at an Eastern college. Godfrey thought there might be a way to blast down a dam that would split the waters of Payoff, send part of it through the old Mirage River bed while leaving enough to flow through the original channel. Payoff runs more water than you need anyway. Every spring it overflows down around that bog region where your daughter ran into trouble."

Hudson was quiet, listening closely.

"Estes had Godfrey kidnaped. He forced Godfrey to sign a bill of sale, giving the B-in-a-Box back to him. They planned to hold him captive until the rumors they spread about Godfrey selling and pulling out of the country had become accepted. Then they'd kill him and dump the body—"

King muttered grimly, "I should have strung that polecat up!"

"Maybe you'll still see him swing," Miller growled. "But right now we're wasting time. They've got a two-hour start on us!"

Hatfield mounted Goldy. "They rode up Mirage Canyon, King. And they're headed for the B-in-a-Box. There's only Jeff, your daughter and Godfrey up there, and Godfrey is bad hurt. We better ride, boys!"

They left in a body, Deputy Miller up front with Hatfield and King Hudson. They rode without talking, each man occupied with his thoughts, oblivious to the natural beauty of this vari-colored canyon that led up to Mirage Valley.

In Miller was an exultation he had not felt in years. He rode straight, his shoulders pulled back, the lines of bitterness somewhat softened by the glow in his eyes. He had lived with the threat of the Deacon and Steve Gundar a long time, and now it seemed as if a heavy hand had been lifted from his shoulders.

In King was concern for his daughter, and a respect for the tall, quiet-voiced stranger who had come to Vanishing Wells and taken over. One man—yet he had bucked the guns of the killers who had held the whole country in subdued terror, and had aged Sheriff Winters faster than the years warranted.

Strangely, in Hatfield's thoughts at this moment, was the memory of the girl who had ridden in the stage with him to Vanishing Wells—a memory softened by thoughts of what might have been. Then the iron in the man came through, and he forced the thoughts from him. There could be no room in the Lone Wolf's hazardous life for a woman.

They emerged into Mirage Valley, and now they heard the faint far-off popping of guns. The sounds came from the direction of the B-in-a-Box!

"They're holding out down there, looks like!" Miller muttered, and looked back to the rest of the posse coming up behind.

"I hope we're not too late!" Hatfield muttered grimly, and sent Goldy forward, letting the golden sorrel run now without holding him to the slower pace of the others.

The King tried to keep up with that flashing sorrel. His cream stallion was a Morgan, and it had a heart to match its

body. But slowly, surely, Goldy pulled away, leaving Hudson and Miller behind, trailing dust.

Hatfield slid his rifle from his saddle scabbard, and he was riding steady in his stirrups when he came down on the B-in-a-Box. He was a good quarter of a mile ahead of Hudson, and the others were strung out behind.

CHAPTER XII

Dynamite at Table Rock

EVEN before Hatfield came within close range, he had located the lines of fire. Estes' men seemed to be concentrated around the corrals and the bunkhouse, firing across the yard into the ranchhouse.

Two men, however, suddenly broke into sight, riding low in saddle, heading clear of the ranch, spurring for the distant break of the old Mirage River gorge.

Hatfield swung wide of the corrals. A man whirled and cut down on him, the bullet making a high whistling past Hatfield's ear. The Ranger fired once and the man jerked and fell backward.

Lepage was making a run for the rear of the ranchhouse, a gun in his fist, when Hatfield, swinging wide of the corrals, came into view. The killer turned and flattened against the ranchhouse wall, unprotected by gunfire at this point, his lips pulling back in animal snarl.

His shot was quick, and lead scoured a burning path across the back of Hatfield's left shoulder. The Ranger slid forward and left Goldy's saddle, letting the sorrel run clear. He landed on his feet and Lepage's lead plucked dust from under his boots. Then he whirled, steadied. The muzzle of his rifle spouted its deadly messengers of death, and Lepage was pinned against the wall, like a butterfly on cardboard. He died hard—still shooting, without aim, triggering until his last shot was gone. And even then he tried to crawl to Hatfield.

He died in the dust of the yard, pawing the earth slowly.

Hatfield swung around, in time to hear the main body of the men who had been trailing him hit the group by the corrals. There was a brief, intense fight. And then it was over.

Hatfield met King Hudson and Miller in the center of the yard, and together they went up the ranchhouse steps.

Jeff opened the door for them. A grim-faced Jeff with a cut on his cheek, a handkerchief making a rough bandage of his left hand. There was a rifle in his right hand, and Miriam Hudson was just behind him, smudged face smiling as she saw the scowl on her father's face. Godfrey was on a cot under one of the windows, his rifle across his lap.

The Big Crown boss let out a growl of relief.

Godfrey chuckled. "You got a daughter you can be proud of, King. More'n I can say for her old man."

"Why, you old mossheaded sheepherder!" King bellowed. "If you weren't—"

Hatfield cut in drily, "There'll be plenty of time for that, you two. From what I make out, you'll both have a lot in common soon." He was looking at Miriam, who was standing close to Jeff, and even King noticed the look in her eyes. He shrugged, knowing when he was licked.

"Two of them got away while I cut around the corrals," Hatfield said. "One of them looked like Estes. Who was the other?"

"It was Bates," Miriam answered. "I saw him when he followed Estes."

"Then they're headed for Table Rock, King!" Godfrey Brant warned. "He won't stand to gain anything now, by blasting Table Rock. Not for himself. But he'll do anything to break you. And if they've set that charge right—"

Hatfield was already headed for the door. "I've a score to pay off up there," he said shortly.

Hudson swung on his heel. "And I've got a job to finish. Take care of her, son," he said to Jeff as he swung by.

Miller limped in, his right leg a bloody mess. One of the Big Crown men was supporting him. "Reckon I'm out of the finish," he said harshly. "But I'll be here, waitin' for you, Hatfield . . ."

RYAN ESTES flung a savage glance over his shoulder. Far down the length of Mirage Valley horsemen were trailing them, small dots in the distance. Bates was riding at his stirrup, the poised veneer stripped from the lawyer, and fear twisting his smooth face out of shape.

Estes sneered. The game had been twisted out of his hands by one man—a tall, green-eyed man who rode with the law of the Texas Rangers behind him. All he had stood to win, all he had built up so carefully in Vanishing Wells, had been destroyed within a week. There was one thing left. One last kick-back before he made his getaway over the Padres.

The two men he had sent to do the job had planted enough dynamite under Table Rock to cave in the entire rock wall holding the waters of Payoff Creek from entering the Mirage River bed!

It would be a parting blow, but it would leave the Big Crown ranges to dry and wither. And eventually it would ruin the man who had humiliated him by running him out of Bueno Padre.

He looked back again to see that the two foremost dots had cut down on their lead, separating themselves from the bigger group behind. "Hatfield!" Estes snarled. He had recognized that golden sorrel as the Lone Wolf had borne down on the B-in-a-Box, and he guessed now that it was the Ranger who was coming up rapidly behind them.

Bates gave a sudden cry. His horse had stepped into a hole and nearly took a tumble. It began to run now in limping fashion, beginning to fall behind.

Bates screamed at him. "I can't make it!"

Estes didn't even look back. He no longer had need of the lawyer. Let Bates take care of himself now, if he could.

He was racing down between the narrowing cut of the old river gorge, his gaze shifting from the rock wall up ahead to the narrow trail which a horse could negotiate to the rim. His two men should be there, waiting.

He swung in toward the trail and glanced back. The two dots which had outdistanced the main group of pursuers had disappeared. The others were still far behind. He tried to imagine what had happened and swore with sudden fear. Bates was still in saddle of a horse that was about to give out.

The two guardians of the dynamite under Table Rock appeared on the rim, rifles in hand. They saw Estes' blowing horse come hunching up the steep trail and one of them came down part way to meet him.

"Fire that fuse!" Estes yelled to him.

The man paused. He pointed down the river bed to Bates. The lawyer was now on foot, running toward them.

Estes slid off saddle. *"Fire that fuse!"*

Now the man shrugged. He ducked back from the rim. Estes climbed up, puffing, to stand beside him. He turned to look down into the old river gorge, and there was no feeling in him as he stared down at Bates' tiny, running figure.

Then the blast rumbled like a violent earthquake. It was a heavy, sullen roar that shook the cliff he was standing on. Table Rock shuddered. Cracks appeared in the gray granite, tears appeared all along the Payoff Creek gorge.

For a moment, above the pall of dust and smoke, Table Rock seemed to remain standing. Then the entire wall dissolved, and the waters of Payoff Creek, running deep and swift here, rushed through the break, carrying boulders and debris down into the ancient river bed.

Down below them the tiny figure of Bates paused. The man seemed to freeze, staring toward that wall of water and debris, hurtling toward him. Then he moved, running with what seemed pitiful slowness toward the cliffs hemming him in.

The waters reached him, washed over him.

Far down in the valley the oncoming riders veered abruptly, away from the menace of that tide that would soon be

slowed and harnessed into its old channel.

One of the dynamite men spoke to Estes. "Look, Ryan," he said, frowning. "Something's gone wrong."

"It went wrong a long time ago!" a cold voice cut in. "It started to go wrong when you kidnaped Godfrey Brant, Estes!"

THE three men on the rim whirled. Estes froze, his breath catching in his throat. *"Hatfield!"*

Hatfield came up from between two boulders, hands swinging easily above holstered guns. Behind him walked King Hudson.

One killer swung his rifle about in a desperate move. Hatfield's first slug knocked him off-balance. He fell against Estes and his threshing weight spun the gambler around. Estes teetered on the rim for a moment, making a desperate attempt to regain his footing. The other man was still stumbling blindly from the shock of Hatfield's slug. He lurched up and fell back into Estes and both went off the rim.

Estes screamed as he fell.

The remaining gunhand hoisted his hands high. "I know when I'm licked, Ranger!" he said sullenly.

Hatfield disarmed him. Then he and Hudson looked down on the new river flowing through the gap blasted by the dynamite. Hatfield pointed. "That's what Godfrey meant, King. He had looked the ground over carefully, and I guess he saw the fault in the opposite wall. It gave way just as he had expected."

The blast had not diverted the entire waters of Payoff Creek. The fault in the opposite wall had given in, opening a new channel into Payoff gorge. The swollen river at this point broke and flowed into two gashes, diminished in volume, but still enough to supply the needs of both the Payoff ranges and Mirage Valley.

"Godfrey gets his water anyhow," King growled.

Hatfield shrugged. "Looks like it's going to be all in the family."

The King turned, startled. "You mean my daughter, and Godfrey's boy—"

Jim smiled. "Jeff'll make a good son-in-law, King."

Hudson shook his head. "It's not that I mind the boy," he grumbled. "But that mule-headed, fire-eating father of his—"

Hatfield chuckled. "You'll have plenty of time for that. Right now it's time we got back."

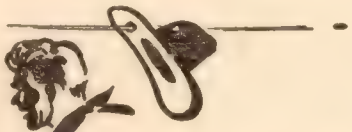
The Lone Wolf stayed overnight at the B-in-a-Box and left the next morning. The King and his daughter, with Jeff and Godfrey, waved good-by from the ranch-house veranda.

"Tell Bill McDowell I'll be ridin' down to Austin one day soon, Jim," Godfrey called. "To collect my bet."

The Lone Wolf grinned, remembering the soiled piece of headgear Captain McDowell wore. "I'll tell him," he promised.

The sun was bright on the walls of Mirage Canyon as he rode, a tall, broad-shouldered man on a golden sorrel.

Godfrey Brant chuckled. "King," he said, turning to the Big Crown man, "let me tell you something about the Rangers—"



Look Forward to Next Month's Exciting Jim Hatfield Novel

WARPATH

By JACKSON COLE

Voices called to each other through the shadows

El Soldado

By
GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

PRIVATE Yndelecio Sepulveda eased his heavy musket to his left shoulder. It was much too big for him. If it was not for his size he would be with his brothers in the First New Mexico Volunteers facing the advancing Confederates near Fort Craig. He sighed as he reached the end of his guard post before the headquarters adobe of Captain Stannard's Independent Company of New Mexico Militia.

A streamer of dust had been growing on the southern horizon for over an hour. He calculated he would be able to shift his musket once more before riders hammered up out of the Jornado del Muerto.

It was a warm morning for February in New Mexico. The day before, thunder had rumbled steadily to the south in the Rio Grande valley. It was peaceful in San Elizario. The original inhabitants had all fled months before from the threat of the Apaches. There was none to keep them in check now that the white men were busy fighting each other.

Yndelecio paced slowly to the end of his post. This was not war. He had thought to ride into battle with his two elder brothers, Pedro who was a *sargento*, and Porfirio, who rode as orderly for Kit Carson, commanding the First New Mexico. But they were both big men for their

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Though a mere five-and-a-half feet in height, Private Sepulveda could shoot with the best of them. But what could any one man do against a young army?

people. Porfirio had laughed and fingered the tips of his fine black mustache when he and Yndelecio had walked to enlist in the plaza at Santa Fe in the summer of 1861.

"But you are too small, Yndelecio," he had said. "I have been a soldier before, fighting the Navajos and Apaches. It is a hard life even for a big man!"

"But I am nineteen now, Porfirio! You yourself have often said there is no man in Nuevo Mexico who is as fine a shot with the rifle as I am. Will they not forget my size and take me for my skill with the rifle?"

Porfirio had placed his big hand gently on Yndelecio's thin shoulder. "They do not do things that way, my brother. Perhaps in the militia, where they are not so particular, they will find a place for you."

"But I do not want to guard storehouses."

THE eyes of the recruiting officer had glistened at the sight of Porfirio. But it was as Porfirio had said—Yndelecio was too small. When they had left the office a small dried-out man, a gringo, with a slight limp and dressed in an officer's faded uniform had stopped them.

"You," he had said to Yndelecio. "Do you want to be a soldier?"

"*Si!*"

"Good! I am Captain Stannard, now recruiting for Stannard's Independent Company of New Mexico Militia. As you see I am unfit for hard field service but I *can* lead a company of militia. Will you enlist with me?"

So it had been. Yndelecio had been issued a blouse far too big and a forage cap far too small. His musket was old and huge, pitted and almost useless. The best had gone to the fighting troops.

In October Yndelecio's company had ridden down from Santa Fe to San Elizario, perched atop bags and bales in the wagons of a train bound south. Once he had seen his brothers with their regiment. Porfirio had waved a careless hand to Yndelecio.

"That is my brother," Yndelecio had said proudly to his squad mates.

Juan Estancia, who had but one eye and whose face was badly pitted by smallpox, had grinned. "But he is a man, Yndelecio. I hear your brother Pedro is also a man. And look at you!"

"*Tuerto* — one-eyed!" Yndelecio had hurled his thin body at his tormentor.

San Elizario was twenty miles from the Rio Grande and thirty miles north of Fort Craig which guarded the great valley. For a time the company had been busy storing beans, bacon, flour, medicines, harness and ammunition, but after that there was little to do but stand guard and sleep.

Yndelecio roused himself from his reverie. He could see the rider now. He leaned into the window of headquarters.

"*Mi Capitan,* a rider comes from the south. Perhaps a courier."

The captain grunted. He came to the door. His gray hair was rumpled. He slept a great deal; there was little else to do. "He will not have a message for us," Stannard grumbled. "There is nothing for us but requisitions and receipts. Stores and more stores." He eyed Yndelecio. "You look tired. You were also on guard last night. Perhaps there was a mistake on the duty roster?"

"There are but twenty-five soldiers left, sir. Ten more men deserted last night. Sergeant Diaz has followed them with fifteen men."

Stannard hit his fist against the side of the doorway. "This is the reward I get for organizing my own company. A pack of sweepings unfit even to guard stores."

Yndelecio reddened. Stannard said quickly:

"Not you, Private Sepulveda. You are a good soldier."

The old man went inside, grumbling. The rider thundered over the rickety bridge spanning the dry irrigation ditch at the edge of the plaza. He was a gringo. A big man covered with dust. He swung down from the saddle and grinned when he saw Yndelecio.

"So they's soldier here? I thought everyone was asleep."

"Our commanding officer awaits you inside this adobe."

"Will you water my horse, *amigo*? I am in a hurry to get up north."

He slapped some of the dust from his blouse and stamped inside. Yndelecio led the bay to the watering trough. A fine carbine was thrust into a boot hanging from the saddle. A heavy saber hung from the pommel. It was a soldier's mount. Yndelecio filled the courier's canteen and rode the bay back towards headquarters.

JUAN ESTANCIA, now a corporal, looked up from his siesta beside the mess shack. He squinted his one good eye. "Is it a *soldato* we see? *Amigos,* it looks more like a chicken perched in the saddle. But not! It is a man! It wears a hat!"

The others laughed. Estancia was quite a wit. Yndelecio ignored him. Estancia should have been drilling his squad but he had stopped that weeks before and the captain had said nothing. If he disciplined the men they would drift off to their homes. It was bad.

Yndelecio tethered the bay outside of headquarters and lingered near the window. The courier was talking.

"The Rebels gave us a good hiding at the Valverde fords yesterday, Captain. We were forced to retreat into Fort Craig. The Confederates will probably advance north up the Rio Grande Valley towards Albuquerque and then to Santa Fe. Couriers are riding to warn the garrisons to destroy all stores they can't take with them. General Canby may follow the Rebels. If he does, he'll need the stores here at San Elizario badly. However, if it is impossible to defend them they, too, must be destroyed."

"They will be defended to the last man!" promised Stannard.

"I hope so." There was a note of amusement in the courier's voice.

"Is that all of the news?"

"Last night I was chased by a band of guerillas. The hills are full of them, waiting a chance to snap up some loot. They followed me to those hills ten miles south of here. There are about a dozen of them; well armed and mounted. Killers, they are. Americans and Mexicans both. They may give you trouble."

"Perhaps. We shall see."

When Yndelecio heard the sound of the men's feet inside, he resumed his pacing. The courier came through the doorway. "You watered my *caballo*, eh, *amigo?*"

"*Si.* He is a fine *caballo,* that one."

The courier swung up into saddle. A strong odor of sweat-soaked wool came to Yndelecio.

"Sir,"—Yndelecio hesitated—"you were in the battle? There were many men killed?"

The courier pulled his carbine from it's boot. He pointed to a neat hole in the stock. "That's no rat hole, little one."

Yndelecio fingered the hole. "Did we do well?"

"Almost whipped 'em. If Pino's battalion of militia had not fallen back and left McRae's guns unsupported we would have won. Those cowardly peons cost us many a good man."

Yndelecio felt a hot rush of blood. "My brothers are with the First New Mexico. Colonel Kit Carson's regiment. They did well?" His voice was almost a challenge.

"Almost as well as us regulars."

"Perhaps you know my brothers? Pedro and Porfirio Sepulvedo?"

"*Si! Si!* A big man with a fine black mustache."

The courier booted his carbine. "I hate to tell you this, *amigo.* I was riding courier for Colonel Roberts. I passed a big Mex riding a fine roan mare. He was wounded when Pino's men fell back. That night I heard tell Kit Carson's orderly was found with his throat cut and his body robbed.

A straggler said he had seen guerrillas finish off the orderly. Yes, that was his name—Porfirio Sepulveda. A hard name to forget. I'm sorry, *amigo.*"

Yndelecio straightened as the courier spurred his horse. The bay galloped toward the north end of the plaza. Dust swept over Estancia's sleeping squad. They fled to the far side of the mess

shack. Yndelecio's heart was sick.

"Private Sepulveda!"

YNDELECIO listlessly entered the headquarters adobe.

"I have heard your bad news, Sepulveda," said Stannard. "But there is much to be done here. I must depend on you. I'm not worried about the Rebels. Sergeant Diaz will probably warn us of their approach in time. It is these guerrillas we must think about."

"But they are only a dozen men, *mi Capitan.*"

"True. But they are desperate and well-armed. I cannot depend on the likes of Estancia. If they come here it will be rich prize. I have heard that you are a fine shot."

"My father, Antonio Sepulveda was the finest shot in all Nuevo Mexico. Once with his rifle he killed two raiding Indians at three hundred paces. This was measured by Kit Carson himself. He taught me well, *mi Capitan.*"

Captain Stannard nodded absently. "We may have use for his teachings. Perhaps we can hole up and prevent the guerrillas from looting the warehouses. There are a hundred rifles stored there. It would be a fine prize for them, to trade to the Indians. No white man would be safe in New Mexico then. You would not like to see that, Private Sepulveda?"

"No, sir! These *bandidos* killed my brother, a hero, on the battlefield when he was unable to defend himself. They will not take these stores without a fight, *mi Capitan!*"

Stannard placed a hand on Yndelecio's shoulder. "Here. Look!" He slid a long box out from beneath his cot. He pulled a rifle out of it. It was a Sharpes. "I have only two of these. One of them is for my own use. This one is for you. Here are three boxes of cartridges and some caps."

"*Si—si.*"

"You will tell Corporal Estancia to place two men on guard in each warehouse and five men at the corral. Scatter the rest in the adobes facing the plaza. You will act as my orderly."

It did not take long for the news to get about the depleted company. Men walked their posts with one eye on the hills to the south. Yndelecio took his prize beside the mess shack and cleaned it. He oiled it sparingly, fitted a cap on the nipple and tested the action.

"That is a fine weapon, Half-Pint." Corporal Estancia held out his own dirty pitted musket. "Give it to me!"

"It is mine! The *capitan* says so!"

"Bah! Am I not a corporal? Give it to me!"

Yndelecio scrambled to his feet. He swung the Sharpes toward Estancia. He capped the nipple and thumbed the heavy hammer back. The sharp *click-click* made Estancia step back. He scowled.

"It is not loaded, Sepulveda."

Yndelecio grinned. The Sharpes *was* empty, but Estancia was not sure. "Step close, my corporal. You will not see Santa Fe again nor dance at the *fiestas.*"

Estancia trembled. He glanced back over his shoulder. "I will tell *el capitan.*"

"If you are alive."

"Wait, Sepulveda."

"*Private* Sepulveda."

"*Si!* Private Sepulveda!"

Yndelecio did not take his eyes from Estancia's. The one-eyed man was good with a knife. One throw and Yndelecio would never walk a post again.

Estancia leaned closer. "Listen to me. I would not harm you. I promised Porfirio I would watch over you." He looked back over his shoulder again. "Boy, the *bandidos* will be here soon. I and my squad have decided we will be killed if we resist. We plan to deal with them. I will tell them you are one of us."

Yndelecio trembled. His finger tightened on the trigger. "If you surrender, I myself will kill you!"

ESTANCIA scuttled around the corner. Yndelecio looked at the hills. Fleet shadows raced across them, a thin wisp of smoke wavered up and was lost against the sky. It must be the guerrillas. A cold finger traced the length of his spine. They would show no mercy. Perhaps

they were the very ones who had killed Porfirio.

Yndelecio filled his canteen and went to headquarters. In the twilight he lay down to sleep with the long rifle close beside him.

He awoke hours later. Stannard lay on his cot. A candle guttered in the neck of a bottle. It threw the officer's sharp profile against the yellow wall. One thin hand lay across his chest gripping his pistol. The other arm hung over the side of the cot, the slender fingers relaxed against the floor. Except for the husking noise of his breathing he looked like one dead. Yndelecio crossed himself. It might be an omen.

It was quiet; it was too quiet. As his senses returned to him he went to the door. The empty plaza was drenched in moonlight. A dry wind scrabbled at the adobes. Although it was not late there were no lights.

He stood in the doorway for a long time. There were no guards in sight. He crossed to the men's quarters. They were empty, and clothing and gear were gone. He ran to the corral. Many of the horses were gone. Twelve of them were bunched in a corner, their eyes moist jewels in the moonlight. They whinnied shrilly. They, too, sensed something. The canvas of the freight wagons flapped steadily in the wind.

The warehouses were locked and deserted. Yndelecio returned to the plaza. The flag halyards rattled against their pole. Above the noise he heard the drumming of many hoofs. He looked to the south. Dust was billowing up close to the plaza. Yndelecio ran to headquarters.

"*Mi Capitan!* Quick! The men. They are gone."

Stannard sat up and thumbed back the hammer of his revolver. "Are there none left?"

"Not one. And horsemen are riding from the south."

Stannard fumbled into his blouse. "I will try to bluff them. You cover me from this window." He walked to the door as horses pounded over the bridge. He looked back over his shoulder. "You are not afraid?"

"I am a *soldado!*"

Stannard pressed Yndelecio's shoulders in his hands and stepped out into the plaza. A gun roared. A bullet smacked into adobe and wailed eerily off into space. Yndelecio nipped out the candle and went to the window.

A horseman slid to a stop on the south side of the plaza. Others rode between the buildings. The moonlight glinted on their weapons.

"Who is in command there?" called Stannard steadily.

The horseman at the edge of the plaza cantered forward. "Captain Camaliel Huff, Confed'rit Army. I want you to surrender these stores fer the use of my Gov'ment."

"My men have you covered, Captain Huff." Stannard swung his arm wide to indicate the adobes bordering the plaza. "Surrender, and you will be given the honors of war."

Huff leaned forward. He was but a few feet from Stannard. "Now that's right interesting, sir."

Stannard's hands were trembling. "You would do well to surrender, Captain Huff."

Huff shrugged and held up his arms. He slid from his saddle. He was a big, black-haired man wearing a stained gray shell jacket.

Stannard walked quickly to Huff's side. Huff turned his head and bellowed, "Don't shoot, men! We're surrounded!"

THERE was a low laugh from the edge of the plaza. Stannard reached for Huff's pistol. Huff swung a thick arm. His fist cracked against the captain's jaw. Stannard went down clawing for his Colt. A heavy boot smashed against his head and he lay still.

Yndelecio raised his rifle, then lowered it.

Three horsemen rode toward Huff. "The stuff here sure enough, Huff?"

"Estancia says so. They got wagon and horses, too. We'll load up tonight and get

out of here at dawn. We can cut northeast through Roca Roja Canyon and get into the Comanche country. We can get a fortune in trade for this stuff here."

"Anyone else around?"

"Naw. If there was they stampeded."

Huff stripped off Stannard's blouse. He ripped the insignia from the shoulders and stuffed them into his pocket. One of the riders dismounted and pulled off Stannard's boots and trousers. He tied a lariat about the unconscious officer's feet and threw the end of it to Huff. The guerrilla tied it about his saddle horn and swung up into saddle. Yndelecio felt sick.

Huff lashed his horse. The horse bolted toward the north end of the plaza. Stannard, a limp figure in baggy gray underwear, dragged and bounced along the hard *caliche* of the plaza.

Yndelecio retched violently. He stepped back into the room. The pound of hoofs brought him back to the window. Huff galloped up and pulled the horse up in a hoof-pawing rear. He slashed at the lariat with his knife. Stannard's body rolled over and over and came to rest just in front of the window. The head was at a sharp angle from the body. The sightless eyes stared accusingly at Yndelecio from a bloody, shapeless face.

Yndelecio ran to the back of the room. He snatched up the captain's field-glasses and climbed out of a rear window. He stood for a long time in the shadows. Fear almost drove him to run wildly out into the desert. He shivered. He prayed to the Virgin of Guadeloupe.

"Go, Yndelecio! Get a horse."

The words seemed to be borne from the dry wind rustling about the corners of the building. Yet it seemed to be the voice of Porfirio. Yndelecio crossed himself. He worked his way slowly behind the adobes to the dry irrigation ditch.

Shouts came from the plaza followed by the heavy *thump-thump* of a beam smashing against a door. He walked softly up the ditch to beneath the bridge. The guerrillas had left their horses with one guard. Moonlight revealed the pock-marked face of Estancia.

Yndelecio crept up behind the horses. He swung the heavy barrel of the Sharpes against the side of the one-eyed man's head. His skull smashed like a dropped melon. Yndelecio mounted a small mare. He slapped his cap against the rumps of the nearest horses and drove them over the bridge toward the desert beyond.

He swung east after the horses had scattered out into the night.

He glanced back at San Elizario. Lights glowed all over the plaza. He could still hear the crashing of wood. It had covered his stampeding of the horses. It would take them hours to round them up; hours he meant to use well.

He rode northeast toward Roca Roja Canyon. He knew the country, for he had hunted there with Porfirio before the war. His mind was full of half-formed plans. Porfirio or Pedro would know what to do, but one was dead and the other was far away. There was only one man who could save those stores for Canby's advance. Private Yndelecio Sepulveda of Stannard's New Mexico Militia.

HUFF had struck too quickly for Yndelecio to save his captain. Like the *uiboras cascabeles*, the rattlesnake. But at least the rattlesnake gave honest warning. So Yndelecio would also be a rattlesnake. A little one it was true, but with a long fang—and plenty of cartridges.

By dawn he was riding through a strange red land of jumbled rock covered with yucca, catclaw and mesquite. He circled up from behind the canyon and picked a position high on the north wall, after picketing his mare in a brushy arroyo. The steep slopes were covered with great boulders. Narrow twisting passages ran between them and underneath them. The road ran like a frayed yellow ribbon at the bottom of the gorge. It was only wide enough for one wagon at a time.

He paced down the slope to the road. It was about two hundred and fifty yards from his hideout. He went back up and tried a few sighting shots at a rock on the far side of the road. A puff of dust shot up from behind the rock. He nodded

solemnly. His father had warned him that one usually fired over the target downhill and under the target uphill.

He had the feel of the Sharpes now. He reloaded and placed a row of cartridges on a flat rock, pulled his cap over his eyes and went to sleep.

The rumble of wheels and the popping of a whip woke him. It was early afternoon. A lone horseman rode down the road constantly twisting and turning as he scanned the walls. A hundred yards behind him came the first wagon of six. Horsemen rode behind the last wagon.

Yndelecio cocked the Sharpes. He cuddled close to the stock and sighted on the near lead horse of the first team. He squeezed the trigger. The echo of the shot slammed back and forth between the walls. The smoke drifted off. The horse was rearing. The teamster shouted. He lashed at his team. They went on for a few feet, then the wounded horse went down with thrashing hoofs. The wagons ground to a halt with a bitter shrieking of dry axles. A shot cracked out and a slug sang over Yndelecio's position.

The lead horseman slid to a stop. He dismounted and ran back to the first team. A knife flashed. Yndelecio's shot sent him sprawling over the horse he had tried to cut loose. The teamsters jumped over to the far side of their wagons. Shots rippled out. Smoke drifted over the wagons, obscuring them from Yndelecio.

The breeze swept the smoke away. For an hour it was load, cap, fire and reload. Yndelecio felt like a puppet he had seen dancing mechanically on its strings at a fiesta. He kept shifting his position.

He drilled a shoulder that bobbed up from a clump of mesquite close to his position. A guerrilla raced up to the lead wagon to try and cut the team loose. Yndelecio dropped him kicking in the dust. The firing died away. Men darted from rock to rock, working their way up towards Yndelecio. He dropped two more horses of the lead team to make sure the wagon could not be moved, then scrambled to a new spot.

A bullet splattered against a rock, driving lead needles into his face. Blood trickled down his face. He crawled backward into a natural tunnel and peered between two boulders. A man rose and stared steadily at Yndelecio's old position, with ready carbine. Yndelecio's shot rolled him backward down the slope.

Sweat poured down Yndelecio's face and stung his cuts. A bullet picked his cap from his head. Then the gorge grew quiet except for the low moaning of a wounded man. Yndelecio rested for a time beneath a shelf of rock. He was panting too heavily to fire accurately.

THE teams stood patiently before their wagons. There was no sign of a living man. It was peaceful. It was too peaceful. They were stalking him as though he were a wild animal.

Yndelecio felt sure he had accounted for at least four of the guerrillas. That left at least eight. He crawled hastily back. Catclaw and cactus tore at his flesh and ripped his uniform. At last he lay high on the canyon wall. He had twenty-two cartridges left. Perhaps he should retreat now while there was still a chance to escape. But it would not take too long to clear away the dead horses and get the wagons rolling if he was not there to stop them. He would stay.

A crackle of rifle fire broke out on the slopes beneath him. Slugs searched the rocks all about him. He fired at a puff of smoke and a man rose, danced crazily and fell in a cascade of stones.

Something smashed into Yndelecio's left arm. He staggered to his feet. He was going to faint. He thrust his rifle forward and fired at a man who appeared below him. The guerilla fell awkwardly.

Yndelecio trotted away from the gorge, braked himself to slide down a loose slope of stones. Thirst gripped at his throat. His arm throbbed. He stopped in a clump of mesquite and bound his arm clumsily with a strip of cloth from his shirt tail. He slid into a deep gully and dodged into a narrow cleft that drove into its side. He could go no farther.

Long shadows made paths of darkness

down the slopes but still Yndelecio did not move. Suddenly he tensed. There was a clash of feet against the rocks. A man slid into the gully directly opposite Yndelecio's hiding place. It was Huff. His jacket was soaked with sweat and he was breathing heavily. He held a long pistol in one hand and a carbine in the other. He looked quickly up and down the gully and then leaned backward, shoving his hat to the back of his head. Stannard's insignia was pinned to his jacket.

Voices called to each other through the gathering shadows. Yndelecio cradled the Sharpes on his left forearm and stepped forward, his right hand against the stock.

Huff looked up. He thrust his pistol forward. He fired just as the Sharpes roared.

Huff's shot tore at Yndelecio's collar. Huff grunted. "Ah," he said shortly. He swayed sideward. A dark stain appeared on the front of his jacket. He dropped his guns and pawed weakly at his chest, then fell heavilly and lay staring at the sky with eyes that did not see.

Yndelecio whooped like an Apache again and again. He went slowly down the gully. When he reached his mare he swung weakly up into saddle. Heads bobbed about in the shadows.

"They got Huff! Let's get out of here! It's Apaches I tell you. Didn't you hear 'em? We won't never see 'em! If we fool around here we'll be drygulched!"

Yndelecio quirted the mare up the gully toward the north as the voices faded away. He bathed his arm with water from his canteen and slept until the sky was gray with the light of dawn. Then he rode back to within half a mile of the canyon and went forward on foot.

The canyon was deserted except for the wagons and teams. A ragged buzzard sailed off before the wind as Yndelecio walked slowly up the road. A coyote howled mournfully at the far end. Dead men lay where they had fallen, stripped of their weapons and boots. Their faces were ghastly. Four of them lay about the wagons. Another lay farther up the hill, his beard fluttering in the breeze.

Yndelecio raised his head suddenly. The gorge to the south was alive with the pounding of many hoofs. He scrambled up the slope and hid behind a boulder.

FOUR horsemen swept about a curve, carbine butts resting against their thighs. They saw the wagons.

The riders were covered with dust. Yndelecio could not see the color of their uniforms. More of them rode around the curve. There were at least fifty of them.

Yndelecio gulped a deep breath. He shot at the rocks on the far side of the canyon just over their heads. A trumpet splintered it's tones against the walls. Yndelecio peered through Captain Stannard's field-glasses. The uniforms were blue. He stood up and shouted.

He was standing there when a tall officer dismounted beside him. Yndelecio smiled wearily. The officer's horse shied and blowed, dancing sideward as he picked up the odor of the dead men.

"Who are you, soldier?"

"Private Yndelecio Sepulveda of Stannard's Independent Company of New Mexico Militia. I turn over to you these wagons which I have recovered for the United States Government."

"Stannard's? We thought all of them had run off. We found poor Stannard's body at San Elizario."

"His last orders to his company were that these stores must be defended. It will be to the credit of the company, sir?"

The officer nodded. He looked at the bodies of the dead men and at the wagons standing in the road. He looked curiously at Yndelecio. "I don't know how you did it. But it was done. General Canby sorely needs these stores for his pursuit of the Confederates. We must see to it that your arm is taken care of. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Yndelecio drew himself up to his full five and a half feet. "I would like to replace my brother Porfirio in the First New Mexico Volunteers. He died at Valverde. A hero. He would like that."

The officer stripped off his gauntlet and held out his hand. "It will be done. We can use all the Sepulvedas we can get."

The UNHOLY GRAIL

A Novelet by ROE RICHMOND

OLD MAN GRAIL didn't need a renegade son like Mike to pull his chestnuts out of the high-blazing range fire. Not much he didn't . . .

CHAPTER I

Prodigal Son

THE ROCKING, jolting grind of the big Murphy wagon had been going on forever, it seemed to Michael Grail. Waking or dozing, the relentless bumping motion was there, stabbing through the stiffened agony of his right side. It wasn't a deep wound. The bullet had torn the flesh and glanced off the ribs. A painful nuisance more than anything else, unless the ribs were broken.

His shirt and the bran sack beneath him were caked with blood, and Mike Grail felt faint and light-headed. But the worst thing had been losing his horse and saddle gear and carbine, and coming back to Cheyenne in this condition.

"That damn Rentlen," he thought. "I should have burned him down when I had the chance. Dutch'll never rest until he gets me, or goes under himself. But I kind of like the kraut head. He's been after me so long, he's like an old pal."

Mike spun into his left-handed draw

Mike Grail hadn't intended to come back this way, but the teamsters who picked him up had been heading for Cheyenne and he'd had to go somewhere before Rentlen caught up with him.

He wondered how his father was getting along on the Diamond G, and felt again that pang of guilt and regret for having run away from home. Not that the Major, old Micah Grail, needed him or anyone else. Still last winter had been a severe one, with heavy cattle losses on the Wyoming ranges, and the Diamond G must have suffered along with the rest.

The feud with the Whipples would be going on as usual. But the old man could take care of himself, and he had Mike's brother, Kirk, Fergus, the foreman Halacy, and a good crew on the ranch. The Major didn't need a renegade son like Michael.

Shifting on the sacks of grain that filled

the hooded wagon body, Mike Grail gulped brackish water from his canteen and felt for his shell belt and guns in the darkness. Moonlight shone faintly on the canvas, and night sounds came dimly through the retching groan of axles and rattle of wheels, the creak of wood and leather.

"We ought to be hauling into town," Mike thought. "Rentlen won't look for me in Cheyenne, because he knows I've sworn never to come home. I wonder if Fran Whipple is married yet, and who her husband is, if any."

IT STIRRED him, as always, to recall the pure proud beauty of Fran's delicate carved face. The high broad brow with the rich brown hair curled above it. The great amber eyes, fine straight nose, wide full mouth, the firm rounded chin and jaws, the flawless throat. And her strong supple body, slender and lissome, with an ample depth at bosom and hip. Fran Whipple, a queen among her swinish money-grubbing brothers and cousins. Of them all, only Lance looked and acted human.

The moon glow faded on the hooded top, and a rising wind beat gustily at the canvas. Rain came with it, light and pattering at first, then settling into a steady drumming downpour. Some homecoming, Mike Grail thought. Wounded, and in the back of a freight wagon. No horse, no gear, nothing but the clothes on his back and his guns, and a thinly lined money-belt.

Depression settled over him. Is seemed as if his whole life had been wasted, was pointless and futile. Everything he'd ever done was wrong. Old Micah Grail's second son, a worthless fiddle-footed drifter, a wild one and a bad one. A career devoted to drinking, gambling, fighting, and wenching. Yes, and even law-breaking, on occasion.

Well, the Major had a good son in Kirk, a good daughter in Helen. They were some compensation for the ne'er-do-well Michael, the Unholy Grail, as the Major once called him, saying: "We have one in every generation, one with the wildness in him."

Then the noises and lights of a settlement were around Mike in the rainy night, and he knew it must be Cheyenne. There was no joy in being there, merely a relief at having the journey ended.

When the Murphy stopped in the freight yard, Mike climbed carefully and stiffly over the tail-gate and dropped into the mud, pain jarring through him. Buckling on his guns he limped around to the front, thanked his benefactors for the ride, and moved slowly toward the street and Doc Weafer's.

The rain seeped through his filthy clothing and blurred the lamplit windows and street lights. The weather had driven people indoors, and Mike Grail was satisfied not to be seen and recognized at once.

Weafer came to the door with a book in his hand, a spare stooped man with a balding head and a dour expression, seeming less surprised than Mike had anticipated. "So you finally got here, young Michael? And you're shot already."

"It didn't happen here." Mike smiled warmly. "You sound like you were expecting me, Doc?"

Weafer blinked at him strangely. "Come in and get out of those wet clothes. Are you carrying any lead, Mike?"

"No, it glanced off the ribs. Nothing bad, Doc."

"It doesn't have to be bad to get infected. Haven't you seen anybody in town?"

"You're the first one."

"Then you don't know, I take it." Weafer sighed and shook his narrow shiny head, scowling fiercely.

"Know what, Doc? Is it—the Major?"

"The Major's all right," Weafer growled. "You didn't know your brother Kirk was going to marry Fran Whipple?"

Mike grinned bleakly. "No. I was wondering if she'd married anybody yet."

Weafer splashed whisky into a glass. "You look as if you needed this, son. And if you didn't, you will. I don't like to break this kind of news, Michael. It's your brother Kirk."

Mike's gray eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened, the high cheekbones and strong jaws standing out sharply under the bronzed coppery-stubbled skin. "Kirk?"

"He's dead, Mike."

MIKE GRAIL'S wide shoulders sagged, and his high rangy frame seemed to shrink, horror and disbelief in his sun-squinted eyes. He was silent for some time, and the doctor suffered along with him.

Finally Mike spoke, hoarse and low: "The Whipples?"

Weafer nodded. "It was a fair enough thing, though. Josh called him."

"Josh Whipple's a gunfighter, Doc," said Mike Grail. "Kirk was never much of a hand with a gun."

"Well, that's the way it was, Michael."

"Over Fran?"

"In a way. They said if Lance Whipple wasn't good enough to marry Helen Grail, then Kirk wasn't going to marry Fran."

"Lance? Has that Lance been courting Helen?" Mike's gray eyes were ice-cold and hard as steel, and his reddish-brown head had a fighting thrust.

"Trying to, I guess."

Mike swallowed the whisky and laughed, harsh and hollow. "The family's gone to hell. Even worse than I have, Doc— How's the Major standing it?"

"Head up, gallant. The way you know he would, Mike. But he's backed to the wall, and the wolves are closing in. His losses ran close to fifty per cent last winter. It was the worst one this range ever saw."

"You mean the Diamond G's on the rocks, Doc?" Mike asked through his white teeth, corded muscles squaring his lean jawbones. He was stripped to the waist now, broad shoulders and chest tapering in to trim flat hips, long arms rippling smoothly with muscle. A blood-crusted scarf covered the wound on his right side.

"Close to it, son," said Weafer. "Stretch out on that table, and let me quit talking and get to work here, young Michael."

Lying on his back with Doc working over him, a strange sequence of disjointed thoughts flickered through the numbness of Mike's mind. It was as difficult to realize that Kirk was dead as it was to conceive of the Diamond G on the verge of ruin. Kirk, the solid reliable rocklike one. The Diamond G, the largest and finest spread in this part of Wyoming.

It started the fury blazing in Mike Grail, to think of long lank weasel-faced Josh Whipple shooting Kirk down. And Lance, the handsome, polished and debonair Whipple, presuming to pay court to Helen Grail!

The first Whipple had come West on the same emigrant wagon train with the first Grail, Mike's grandfather, but they were worlds apart in background and breeding and blood. In 1843, that caravan had been bound for Oregon, but Jeremiah Grail liked the looks of this Wyoming Territory. Staking his claim on Horse Creek, Jeremiah had bought cattle, gathered up mavericks and strays, and founded the Diamond G, later trail driving his own longhorn herds up from Texas.

The Whipples, townsmen and traders, settled in Cheyenne, building up various mercantile businesses, prospering and multiplying. But wealth never made the Whipples equal to the Grails. The Whipples were nobodies with a shrewd knack for making money. The Grails were real quality. There was always envy and hatred on one side, and aloof contempt on the other.

The Whipples became big men in this frontier country, but never big enough to drink with a Grail nor cross the threshold of the Diamond G. Yet the Whipples were many, breeding like rabbits, according to the Major, while old Micah and young Mike now were the only Grails left on the masculine side.

"It's a good thing I happened back this way," Mike thought. "For once in his life the Major may need me, and for once in my life I may be of some use to him."

Old Noah was the head of the Whipple clan, a beaked vulture with a down-

turned mouth, greedy, glittering eyes, and taloned grasping hands. He had three sons. Thin towering Joshua resembled his father facially, was notoriously expert with guns, and had killed Kirk Grail. Branch was squat, broad and burly, a neckless big-headed bull of a man. Lance, the good-looking one, had a poise and grace that made him alien in that family, and a flair with firearms which nearly paralleled Josh's. He and Frances, the daughter, had inherited their mother's beauty and charm.

OF THE numerous cousins, the small sleek Prosper and dry, wizened Moses were the most important, born tradesmen and ruthless profiteers, placing financial gain ahead of everything else in the world.

"How come the Diamond G's losses were so heavy, Doc?" inquired Mike Grail. "We always had Goshen Hole to winter our stock in."

"There was trouble last winter, Michael," said Weafer. "The Whipples filed claims all the way between the Diamond G and the Hole. They put up fences, Mike. When the storm struck, Diamond G cattle died by the hundreds on Whipple wire. Thousands of head never got into the shelter of Goshen."

"Dummy claims," Mike said, teeth on edge. "Why didn't the Major and Kirk wipe them out?"

"The law was behind the Whipples, son."

"Sure, they buy peace officers like they buy bacon! I should've been home instead or ramming around the country like a wild horse."

"Well, you're here now, Mike," said the doctor gently.

Mike Grail smiled. "And hell's going to bust wide open in the South Platte."

"Does that hurt?" Weafer was probing with sure deft fingers.

"Some," Mike said, sweat beading his lean, drawn features. "Not too bad, Doc."

"The ribs aren't broken, or even cracked, and there's no infection. You'll be all right in a few days, Mike. But don't try to draw against Josh or Lance or anybody else until that side heals."

"I can wait, Doc," drawled Mike Grail. "And I can use the left hand, if anybody presses me."

CHAPTER II

The Fugitives

DOC WEAFER kept Mike there overnight, feeding him well, and bedding him down in one of the comfortable spare rooms. In the morning Mike bathed luxuriously in a large tub of warm soapy water, while Doc's handyman, Gabe, went out to buy him a new outfit of clothing.

Weafer redressed and bandaged the wound then, and Gabriel trimmed Mike's rusty brown hair and shaved him with an expert hand. In the fresh new clothing—gray-and-blue plaid shirt, blue scarf and jeans—Mike felt and looked like a different man. His own boots and hat, belt and sheaths and leather vest, were still good once Gabe had cleaned them, as was the short buckskin jacket.

Rising from Gabriel's excellent breakfast of ham and eggs and fried potatoes, toast and coffee, Mike Grail grinned at Weafer.

"I don't wonder you never got married, Doc. Old Gabe's a living miracle."

The colored man ducked his kinky gray head, a wonderful smile splitting his seamed black face. "Sho', Mistah Mike. Nothin's too good for quality folks like the Grails."

Mike wanted to set out at once, but Doc prevailed upon him to rest through the day and await the darkness. He had a lot of information to give the boy, to bring him up to date on the local situation. Among other things Weafer revealed the fact that Fran Whipple hadn't been seen since Kirk's death a month ago. It was rumored that she had fled, or been driven from the family home, and was being held prisoner in Prosper's house,

directly behind Doc's on the next street.

They were still talking over after-supper cigars and brandy that evening, when Weafer was summoned to the kitchen by an urgent knocking at the back door. Mike got up and paced the parlor floor, restless from twenty hours' confinement, deciding it was time to go and get himself a horse and head for the Diamond G.

The doctor returned with Fran Whipple, pale and ill-looking, a black cloak over her riding habit. Her gold-colored eyes widened at the sight of Michael Grail, and he stared back at her in equal surprise. She was lovely in spite of her pallor and gauntness, her cheeks sculptured with delicate hollows, her high-held chestnut head shimmering with bronze and copper highlights.

"I'll leave you alone," Weafer said. "Perhaps, Fran, this will be better than medicine for you." They didn't seem to hear him, or notice his withdrawal, moving slowly toward one another.

"Mike," she murmured. "Oh, Michael!"

"Fran," he said, as they came together and stood close. "What have they been doing to you, Franny?"

"I've got to get away from there. I came to ask Doc to help me. The only way I could get out was to tell them I had to see Doc, and they didn't want him over there."

"Who's there?"

"Prosper and Moses. My father and brothers won't speak to me or look at me, Mike."

"Because—of Kirk?"

"Kirk—and you, both. They never forgave me for—for seeing you, Mike."

These two had been in love once, madly and thoroughly, but neither family would consent to a wedding. It was the Major's flat refusal that had prompted Mike to leave the Diamond G. Now, even with the shadow of Kirk between them, something of the old deep current flowed from one to the other and held them close, entranced, awed and wondering.

"I'll take you away, Fran," said Mike Grail. "I'll take care of you."

"But where—and how? They'll hunt you down and kill you, Mike."

His smile was somber. "I've got some killing of my own to do."

"There's no use, Mike, it's no good." Fran gestured despairingly. "It'll just cause more fighting and dying." She was near the breaking point.

MIKE'S arms enclosed her and drew her gently to him. Gradually the tension left Frances and she relaxed in his comforting embrace, her own arms creeping around his lithe rangy frame and clinging tight. Slowly her bright head tipped back, the pale pure face and wide soft lips lifting to his.

The sweet fire of the kiss burned away the two years of their separation, the romance and tragedy of Kirk, the lifelong feud of their families. It welded them into one, obliterating all the lost time and loneliness, leaving the crush of their lips and bodies the only reality.

Clamoring voices from the kitchen broke the spell at last, rending them apart and restoring their senses.

"It's Prosper!" cried Fran softly, in panic. "Prosper's come after me, Mike!"

"Don't worry, Fran. He won't get you."

They heard Doc Weafer's voice rise, still mild but firm: "She's my patient, Prosper. I don't need any advice or interference."

Prosper was the suave, slick one with the oily tongue. "As her cousin, Doctor, my interest is natural, I believe. Frances is under my protection at present."

"Quite," agreed Weafer. "But I treat my patients in private. I must insist that you leave, Prosper."

"That's your right, I suppose. But I'd be mighty careful in my treatment—and advice, Doctor. She's a Whipple, you know. I'll wait here to walk home with her, if you don't object to that, sir?" There was a sneering threat beneath Prosper's politeness.

"As you wish. I'll say good night now." Weafer shut the door and snicked the bolt into place, and Mike visualized the expression that must have come on Prosper's plump smug countenance. Weafer

came back to the parlor, frowning with distaste. "You probably heard some of that."

Mike Grail nodded. "We're leaving, Doc. I'm taking Fran with me. I'm more than obliged for everything, Doc, and I hope this won't get you into trouble."

"Don't worry about me, Mike. They won't bother a medical man. You're the one they'll be after, son."

"We'll get out of Cheyenne tonight, Doc. Ready, Fran?" Mike was strapping on his gun-belt, tying the holsters down, shrugging into his buckskin jacket.

"Yes, I'm ready," Fran Whipple said. "And I want to thank you too, Doc."

Weafer waved it off carelessly. "Nothing, my dear. If you go quietly, Prosper may not come around front and try to stop you." His wry features lighted with a rare smile. "Here's luck to you both."

They opened the front door noiselessly and moved stealthily down the walk, through the gate, and across the plank sidewalk. They were slanting across the street when Mike glimpsed the slight warped form of Moses Whipple against a white picket fence, crouching and bringing a double-barreled Greener to bear on them. Hearing that ominous double click, Mike pushed Fran on ahead and swiveled smoothly back to face that deadly weapon.

Stray lamplight varnished one side of Moses' withered snarling face, snag teeth bared over the twin barrels. Mike Grail's left hand swept up and orange flame bloomed with a deafening blast, the Colt kicking hard against his wrist.

Moses lurched backward with the .44 slug in him, and the shotgun bellowed skyward in a tremendous shattering roar. The Greener clattered to the slat walk as Moses Whipple blundered onto the pickets, twisted off and jack-knifed, writhing under a hitch-rail into the ditch, dust clouding briefly about him.

Running on after Fran, the gun swinging in his left hand, Mike Grail hurried her into a dark alley on the other side. Crossing back yards in the vague light, threading black labyrinths littered with trash, tin cans, bottles, and garbage, Mike led the way toward the rear of the Inter-Ocean Hotel.

The proprietor, Cameron, was an old friend of the Major and the family. He looked down on the Whipples as much as the Grails did. Cam would help them, if anyone could. Cam would hold off the Whipples, if necessary, get them horses, and furnish an escort out of town, providing things got bad enough to require one. Cameron was a man and a gentleman, like Doc Weafer.

THE RAIN of the previous evening had been short-lived, and this night was clear, cool and bright, the rooftops washed with moonbeams and starshine. There was no evidence of organized pursuit as yet. Here and there people appeared in windows, doorways and yards, but made no attempt to stop Fran Whipple and Mike Grail. The girl was stumbling and sobbing for breath, and Mike's right side felt scalded with pain.

They dodged across a busy street crowded with pedestrians, horsemen and wagons. Music from the honkytonks beat brassily through the dusty light-splashed air. They were recognized here, but observers withheld comment until they had passed. There was a wild, reckless look about young Grail that invited no familiarity.

Carnival-like street sounds followed them into a final alley, opening on the hotel drive leading back to the stable. Leaning on rain barrels, they paused to rest and let their hearts and breathing slow to a semblance of normalcy.

As they crossed toward a side entrance of the Inter-Ocean, a hastening group loomed at the head of the driveway. Mike saw some of the Whipple gunhands among them. Blubber Wallont, enormously fat, moon-faced, deceptively jolly and harmless-looking. Sharp little Flicker Fruin, and big, raw-boned, swaggering Joe Tench.

Spotting the Grail, they started reaching and fanning out, but Mike's left hand flashed again and his swift shots drove

them to cover. Mike reached the door behind Fran, with bullets showering his legs with gravel and spraying wood splinters over his ducked head and shoulders.

Bursting inside, they made for Cameron's private office in back of the great lobby, immeasurably relieved when Cam himself answered the door. Surprise and pleasure were mingled with apprehension in his rugged Scottish face.

"Well, Michael—and Miss Frances. I might have known it was the Grails and Whipples when I heard that shootin' outside. Come in and be at home, folks."

He was a big man in an immaculate frock coat, almost up to Mike's six-one height, broad and solid, ruddy of complexion, gray of hair and mustache. He bowed to Fran and gripped Mike's hand.

"Afraid we're goin' to have company, Cam," said Mike Grail.

Cameron smiled. "Only a favored few are entertained in this room. Help yourself to a drink, Mike, and there's wine if the lady wants it. I'll step outside and meet your callers."

"We'll be needing a couple of good horses, Cam."

"I'll arrange for that, Michael, when the way is clear." Cameron went out, adjusting the door so it would lock behind him.

Fran Whipple sank into a plush easy chair with a sigh, shaking her burnished coppery head at the offer of wine. Mike poured himself a generous brandy and took another chair, glancing with approval about the handsomely fitted office with its stone fireplace and bookcases, gun racks and paintings. The Inter-Ocean was luxurious for a frontier hotel.

The Whipples and their employees had never been welcomed here, and Mike knew that Cam would dispose of them now without too much difficulty. Like Major Micah Grail, Cameron had an elegant ease and quiet grandeur of manner that made the Whipples and their kind instantly uncomfortable and inferior, save for Frances and young Lance.

"You see, Mike," said Fran. "We'll never get away from them."

"Yes, we will, Franny."

"But where, Michael? There's no place to go."

"There's the Diamond G."

"We won't be wanted there, Mike. Certainly not after—after all that's happened."

MIKE GRAIL smiled over his glass. "We may be, Fran. Doc told me the Major was agreeable to Kirk's marrying you."

"Yes." Fran stared down at her slim, graceful hands. "He said stubbornness had cost him one son, Mike. And—and he couldn't afford to lose another."

"He said that?" Mike shook his head in slow wonder, the coppery strands glinting in his cropped brown hair. "Then we're all right, Fran. Of course, I'm not Kirk, but— Well, I'm Kirk's no-good kid brother. Maybe Kirk was too good for the kind of war the Diamond G's got to fight."

"Too good for me, I know," murmured Fran, head still bowed.

"Did you—love him, Franny?"

"Not as I did you, Mike. I liked him, I was fond of Kirk. I admired and respected him. But it was different, Mike, it wasn't the same."

He crossed and knelt beside her chair, and Fran held his rust-colored head against the high firm warmth of her breast. "Nothing could be, could it?" he whispered, breathing in the fragrance of her.

"Nothing, Mike. Not anything, not ever."

He rose at the sound of a key in the lock, and Cameron came in smiling gravely.

"The visitors have gone, possibly for reinforcements. Moses is still alive, in the care of Doc Weafer. The horses will be waiting at the rear, and some of the boys will ride a piece with you."

"That's fine, Cam." Mike nodded at a rack of rifles. "Can I borrow one of your carbines, too? I lost about everything that wasn't latched right onto me. I could sure use one."

CHAPTER III

Gunsmoke Homecoming

THE ESCORT turned back at Confederate Ridge, and Mike Grail rode on into the northwest with Fran Whipple. The Laramie Mountains bulked against the stars before them, and a high white moon soared serenely overhead. The country was broken by raw red buttes, sharp-profiled mesas, and rolling wooded hills. Night breezes bore the clean smell of sage and grass and distant pine forests. Far off in the west reared the massive towering ramparts of the Continental Divide, and to the north glistened the fabulous frosted peaks of the Snowy Range.

"Home country," Mike thought, "and beautiful enough to take your breath away."

He had been a fool ever to think of renouncing a heritage like this. He could be grateful now to Dutch Rentlen for shooting down his horse and driving him back Wyoming way. Riding such a land with the woman you loved was all any Western man should ask for. But when they came within sight of Horse Creek, the beauty went out of it.

What had been open range of the richest graze, all the way along the Horse from Diamond to Goshen Hole, was now chopped into homestead claims sponsored by the Whipples, cross-hatched with wire fences, blotched by ugly soddies and board shacks and pole corrals. On that wire last winter, the Major had seen his prime beef trapped and frozen to death, and this spring he had seen his eldest son Kirk die with Josh Whipple's bullets in him.

A terrible blazing fury filled Mike Grail to the point of bursting, and hatred was so rife and rank it tasted like acid poison in his taut dry throat.

"Look!" he moaned in misery. "Look what they've done to the finest grassland in the Territory!"

"I know, Mike," said Fran Whipple. "I hate them for it, too. Almost as much as you do."

Keeping well away from the river, they turned upstream toward the Diamond G, still distant on the headwaters of the Horse, near the foothills of the Laramies. The position of the Big Dipper indicated an hour or more beyond midnight. If nothing happened, they should be at the ranch for breakfast.

Mike was beginning to ponder on how the Major might greet them. The last year must have embittered Micah Grail, and the loss of Kirk, his favorite, must have come close to killing him.

Short-cutting past a wide loop in Horse Creek, they traversed a wild area scattered with huge boulders and jagged outcroppings, wooded with spruce and fir, scrub oak and juniper. The approach to Sioux Springs was a long irregular upgrade, tangled with buckbrush and thimbleberry, with bitterroot making starry patches here and there, and Cherokee roses perfuming the night.

Mike considered stopping to see Reb Tarrant, a hermitlike character who lived in wilful isolation here, but decided against it at this late hour. The plaintive bawling of steers sounded, as they reached a somber majestic stand of pines at the summit. Winding through the dark, scented grove, they emerged on a broad shelf, the farther rim of which overlooked the basin of the springs.

Fran was exclaiming over a bed of buttercups and verbena when the racket of gunfire rolled up to them, sharp and vicious through the stillness. Dragging his borrowed carbine from the scabbard, Mike Grail booted and lifted his black gelding into a gallop, with Fran following on her bay mare. The shooting ceased, then the rumbling thunder of stampeded cattle surged back from beyond Sioux Springs.

Reining up on the rimrock, Mike peered down into the misty moonlight of the bowl, and choked back a curse. A score or so of steers lay stark and stiff about

the water-hole, a few of them still groaning and threshing in their death throes under the willows and cottonwoods.

Mike's first thought was that they had been shot, but he quickly realized there hadn't been enough firing to account for that number. Something else had killed those Diamond G cattle. The water must have been poisoned! By the Whipples, of course, or their hired hands.

THE shooting puzzled Mike, for the spoilers wouldn't be chousing beef away from the defiled watering place. Then he saw a horse down among the cows, hunched on its side in death, and the body of a man sprawled nearby. Moonbeams touched flowing white hair and beard, and Mike knew it was old Reb Tarrant, who always had considered himself the guardian angel of Sioux Springs—and Diamond G stock, in general.

After searching and listening for an interval, Mike motioned Fran to stay back, and put his black over the edge. Halfway down the slope he heard her mare sliding after him, but he didn't turn to look, or say anything. Fran was probably as safe with him as anywhere. Reb must have driven the marauders off before a bullet dropped him. Perhaps the old mountain man had merely been thrown and was stunned, but he looked as dead as everything else around the water-hole. One more thing the Whipples would have to pay for.

Mike Grail handed the carbine to the girl. "You know how to use it, Franny. Keep a lookout while I see to Reb."

Stepping down he crouched over the buckskin clad form. Reb Tarrant, shot through the body, was unconscious, but breathing. His hooded eyes fluttered open, as Mike swabbed the bearded face with canteen water.

"Mike, my boy," he panted. "Is it—you? Or am I—seeing things?"

"It's me, Reb. I don't think you're hit too bad."

"Don't matter much—at my age. Sure glad—to see you back. They're ruinin'—the whole range—Mike, boy."

"Who was it, Reb?"

"Thorp and Bloomer—for sure. And maybe—Branch Whipple."

"I'll get you up to the cabin, Reb," said Mike Grail. "Can you stay on a horse?"

Reb Tarrant grinned. "If I can't, I ain't worth saving."

Mike lifted him upright and hoisted him into the saddle on the black gelding. Reb gripped the horn, bowed and swaying, but determined to stick. "That gal with you? That Whipple gal? She t- -ing—to get you—killed too?"

"No, Reb. She's on our side. Running away from her family."

"No good, Mike. She's a Whipple. No good—not any of 'em."

Mike slapped the black's flank lightly. "Go ahead, Reb, lead the way. I'll bring your saddle and rifle and gear."

Reb Tarrant was mumbling as the horse moved beneath him. "Poisoned the spring, Mike. Lowest critters—on earth. Would of killed—whole herd. Me, I can't shoot—nohow like—I used to."

The Tarrant cabin sat securely on a pine-wooded knoll, surrounded by a crude natural barricade of rock outthrusts and jumbled boulders, not far above Sioux Springs. They were at the corner of the log hut, Reb slumped in the lead, Fran riding next, and Mike bringing up the rear on foot when they heard the slug strike solidly and saw old Reb Tarrant jerk and stiffen in the leather. The rapid blasting of guns followed, with lead whining about them and tearing at the logs.

Chasing the horses around to the front, Mike yelled: "Inside, Fran! Horses and all. And lay low in there!"

Somehow Reb had stayed in the saddle, and Frances drove the gelding into shelter ahead of her mare. Mike had dropped the saddle and everything but Reb's carbine, diving away from the cabin and slithering into the cover of a projecting ledge.

The muzzle flashes, from three different points, were vivid under the heavy gloom of pine boughs, and Mike Grail opened fire on one after another, as fast as he

could aim, trigger, lever, and aim again. He kept moving, shifting positions, screening his body behind tree trunks and rocks. It filled him with reckless raging fury, to think the Whipple trio had come back to finish the job. That first bullet wouldn't have killed old Reb Tarrant, but the second certainly would have.

In a swift flanking movement, Mike was weaving and working his way toard the enemy, and he scored with the last shell in Reb's rifle. He heard a grunting cough, a strangled scream, and thrashing about in the hackberry thicket on his left.

WHEN Mike reached that point, the noises had ceased and he found the swarthy, sullen man named Thorp dead in the brambles. It impressed him no more than a dead prairie dog would have.

The other two were retreating on the right, one in outright headlong flight, the other slow and blundering in the brush. That would be Bloomer lighting out at full speed, and big Branch Whipple doing all the awkward crashing around in the darkness.

Bloomer had mounted and was riding for it now, the hoofbeats floating back toward the piney knoll, receding and fading steadily. The sounds Branch made told of panic at being left alone in a wilderness duel, and Mike Grail called out to him:

"Over here, Branch! Just you and me!"

A burst of blind firing was the squat giant's only response, and Mike laughed aloud when the echoes thinned away on the outer slopes. His rifle emptied, Branch went bulling back to locate his horse. Having no more .50-caliber shells for Reb's carbine, Mike left it leaning on a slab of stone and drove his long legs after the cumbersome foeman.

"What's your hurry, Branch?" he shouted. "I'm only one man."

"Fight me bare-handed, Mike?" came the hopeful counter question.

"Why, sure," Mike said, still prowling forward to close the gap.

"I don't believe it. You ain't got the guts to meet me with the bare hands!"

"Why not?" jeered Mike Grail. "I can take you any way you want it!"

"Come in empty-handed then!" Branch Whipple bellowed.

He was waiting in the moonlit glade where his mount was tethered, a monstrous brawny bulk with gorillalike arms hanging clear, and his gun-belt slung over the saddle. "Drop your belt, Mike! Don't be a coward on me!"

Mike Grail laughed with soft amusement, hands at belt buckle as he sauntered forward, tall and limber and easy. "I'll drop it, Branch. I just want to make sure of you."

"You can see I'm holding nothing. Ain't got a weapon on me, Mike." He spread his great arms, wider and higher, trying to hide the gloating in his broad, coarse face. "Drop them guns!"

"No hurry," drawled Mike. "I'll drop 'em when we're close enough to swing."

Branch Whipple shook his right arm, flipping his wrist in a peculiar motion, and the arm slashed suddenly across in front of him. Steel spun a sparkling thread in the moonlight, flying with a deadly swish, and Mike barely pulled twisting away from that hard-thrown knife, the hilt brushing his jacket as he spun into his left-handed draw.

Fire jetted, illuminating the dread and terror stamped on Branch's ugly countenance. The slug smashed his right arm at the shoulder, twirling his gross bulk halfway around.

Mike leveled off from the recoil and lined his second shot into that massive left shoulder as it whirled forward. Beaten backward by the impacts, Branch Whipple bumped a boulder, heaved ponderously off it, and stood slumped and broken on sagging legs. Striding in close Mike struck savagely with the gun-barrel, swiping it back and forth across that brutal face, clubbing it down on the shaggy oversized head.

Branch was falling with a long-drawn groan, but Mike shouldered in under his hulking weight and lifted it, flinging him

back across the saddle and hauling him over so he lay belly-down.

Snatching the lariat from the pommel, Mike lashed Branch's wrists and ankles together beneath the girth, and took a few turns about his body and the saddle-horn. Hanging there senseless, blood streamed from the gory ruin of Branch's face and his wounded shoulders. Untying the reins, Mike wrapped them loosely on the horn and sent the horse off into the waning light.

"Go home and show them what happens to cattle-poisoners and killers," Mike Grail murmured. "That ought to bring out the whole rotten Whipple pack." He turned and tramped wearily back toward the cabin, his right side ablaze with anguish. He stopped to pick up Reb's carbine and saddle gear.

IN THE log house, old Reb Tarrant lay dead, and Fran Whipple was sobbing quietly in a far corner. "Oh, Michael," she whimpered. "I was so afraid—you were dead, too. Thank heaven, Mike!"

He stood looking down at the white-bearded frontiersman, pain in his slitted eyes, his lean face rigid with grief and anger.

"Poor old man," Fran said. "He died cursing the Whipples. And calling on God to bless the Grails."

"Well, can you blame him?" Mike asked dully.

"No-o, I don't blame him atall, Mike. But he included me—with the Whipples."

Mike smiled gravely. "Reb didn't know you, Fran."

"Maybe he was right," she whispered. "With that blood in me, Mike, who knows? Perhaps I am bad, like the rest of them."

Mike Grail raised her tenderly into his arms. "I'll take a chance on that, Franny. The best of the Whipples ought to be good enough for the worst of the Grails."

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CHAPTER IV

Major Micah

NEXT afternoon Micah Grail, the Major, was sitting on the deep shaded gallery of the great stone Diamond G ranchhouse when a haze of dust far down the valley of Horse Creek caught his eye. He had sent Fergus, Halacy and some of the boys to investigate certain strange doings reported at Sioux Springs, but it was too early for their return. The other riders were out on the range, or busy about the spread.

There was something ominous about that reddish-yellow dust cloud, the Major concluded. Stepping into the cool dimness of the house, he buckled on his gun-belt, selected a Henry repeater from the rack, and went out to resume his seat on the broad porch. In troubled times like these, a man couldn't be caught far from his guns.

The Major wore a flawlessly clean white linen shirt, a loosely knotted black string tie, yellow-striped blue cavalry trousers that still fitted after twenty years, and bench-made boots of the finest leather. A big man, bigger and handsomer than his sons, he stood six-three and had a rare natural dignity, a poised ease and assurance, a serene air of authority and command. There was a noble cast to the auburn head, somewhat dulled and streaked with gray, and to the finely hewn features that were so distinguished, austerely aristocratic and yet human, gracious and kind.

"This family's getting extremely small," Micah Grail thought unhappily. "Only Helen and myself left now. Martha went first with the fever, then young Mike ran away, and now Kirk is dead and buried with Whipple lead in him. Last winter and Whipple barbed-wire took almost half the Diamond G stock, and Whipple rustling is reducing the remainder. I wish young Michael would come home. A wild sky-

hooting go-to-hell gunslinger is what this ranch needs right now. But Mike is gone and maybe dead by this time, in some barroom brawl or range ruckus."

The saffron dust pall was rolling closer, and Micah Grail could make out individual horsemen in the front ranks. Looked like Sheriff Hynes and some of his deputies, and the Major thought he could smell Whipples even at this distance.

The Whipples were getting high-and-mighty, since they had bought out the law and carried that stupid Hynes in their vest pocket. What the South Platte needed was a damn good house-cleaning. Micah wished he was twenty years younger, and had Michael back at his side. They'd cut a swath through those scurvy Whipples and their phony homesteaders and bought lawmen. They'd smoke out all the polecats in this part of Wyoming.

The posse was at the gate now, and Micah Grail could see Hynes and several deputies, along with old Noah Whipple and his son Lance and nephew Prosper. At least they had sense enough to keep Josh away from the Diamond G, but even though Kirk's killer wasn't among them Micah had to fight down an overpowering impulse to turn the Henry loose on that rabble.

They filed in and drew up before the long gallery, their arrogance already diminishing as Micah Grail rose deliberately to his full and stately height, the carbine held casually in the crook of his elbow.

"Where's your boy Mike?" asked Sheriff Hynes, embarrassment on his flat, shallow, small-featured face.

"I wish I knew."

"You mean you haven't seen him, Major?"

"Not for two years."

"He's back here, Major."

"That's good news," Micah Grail said. "Thanks for bringing it."

Hynes flushed under the sallow pitted skin. "Not so good. I've got a warrant for him."

"What's he done anyway?"

"Shot three men and carried off a girl."

The Major smiled. "The boy's still kind of wild, must be."

"It's no joke, Major," blustered Hynes. "Mike killed Thorp, wounded Moses and Branch Whipple, and lugged off Miss Frances!"

"Well, what do you want me to do about it, Sheriff?"

"You—you say he isn't here, and you haven't seen him?"

"That's right."

"Search the premises, you fool!" hissed Noah Whipple, rubbing his hooked beak of a nose, mouth turned down lower than ever.

"Don't be hasty," advised Micah Grail. "My word's always been good in this country."

"He's right, Noah," mumbled Hynes. "You can see he's telling the truth. Mike ain't here. He may land here later, but he ain't got here yet."

THE men on horseback milled uncertainly, highly uncomfortable under the Major's cool gray scrutiny. He made them seem small and awkward, feeble and foolish. Most of them wanted to leave immediately.

"If you ever have occasion to come back here, Hynes," said Micah, "don't bring any Whipples with you. They can send you here, but I won't have them on the Diamond G."

Prosper said glibly, "This is legal business, not personal, Major. We're here as part of the sheriff's posse."

"There was no warrant and no posse when Joshua Whipple shot my son Kirk," said Micah Grail. "The law's only active when Whipples are shot, it appears. Good afternoon to you all." It was a blunt curt dismissal, and the posse accepted it, the Whipples resentful and grudging, but taking it along with the rest.

Micah Grail watched them ride out of the yard, a faint, grim smile curving his handsome mouth.

"So young Mike *is* back," he thought, "and already raising particular hell with the Whipple family. He'll probably drift in here with the darkness tonight. And

Frances with him. I guess the girl always loved Mike, and I should have let him marry her. I lost one son by saying 'No,' and the other by saying 'Yes.' But young Michael is back, and the Diamond G still has a chance of survival.

"I'll have a drink on that," the Major decided. "It makes a man awful dry and thirsty, talking to riffraff like that. They'll need a damn sight bigger and better posse than that one, if they think they're ever going to take my boy Mike."

Helen met him in the doorway. She was slim and blonde, dainty and flower-like, with her mother's large deep blue eyes and sweet, sad smile. "Was Lance Whipple out there with those men, Dad?" she inquired.

"I guess so, Helen. There was a parcel of Whipples. Are you still pining for the only good-looking male the Whipples ever spawned?"

"I don't know, Dad, I really don't—What did they want anyway?"

"Looking for Michael. He's back, Helen. It looks like the boy's coming home again, after all."

Her face lighted radiantly.

"That's wonderful, Dad! But Mike'll have to be careful. They'll try to kill him, too."

"Don't worry about Mike. Will you join me in a drink to his homecoming?"

"Sure, Dad, I could use a drink," Helen said, but her smile was vague, and her blue eyes turned wistfully down Horse Creek after the riders.

Micah Grail laid a friendly arm on her shoulders. "Come, Helen. If you still want him, after this is over, I won't stand in your way. There ought to be two decent Whipples, by the law of averages—Mike's Fran and your Lance, perhaps."

"Lance is wild—like Mike. But he isn't bad."

"Maybe we can spare him for you then."

"It's going to be war then, Dad?"

"It's always been war," Micah Grail said. "But this time it's all the way to a finish. Either the Grails or the Whipples. There isn't room for both . . ."

WITH the darkness Mike Grail and Fran Whipple descended from the Laramies, where the threat of that hostile posse had kept them in hiding throughout the long day. They rode in silence for the most part, close enough without words, following foothill trails that Mike had known since childhood.

Eagerness and reluctance mingled in Mike, at the prospect of coming home. It wouldn't seem right without Kirk. It wasn't going to be easy to face the Major. Yet Mike wouldn't have been headed anywhere else in the world.

They paused on the last rise of land behind the ranch. The moon had risen and was pouring its sparkling light over the layout and the eastward stretch of Horse Creek Valley. A flood of bittersweet memories swept through Mike Grail's mind, memories pleasant and painful at once.

Fran sidled her mount alongside and touched his arm with quiet understanding.

Mike leaned over from the saddle and laid his lips against hers, briefly and gratefully.

"They probably left somebody to watch the spread," he said slowly. "But we're going in anyway, Fran."

Slanting down the last long slope, Mike felt a stirring lift in his breast and a sharp catch in his throat. Home after two vagrant homeless years! The woman he loved beside him, his father and sister waiting in the big stone house below. It might have been a perfect moment, if Kirk were alive, and there were no war to wage against the Whipples.

As they neared the outbuildings, Mike glimpsed a flicker of motion in the junipers off to the left.

Pulling up he got down and handed the reins to the girl.

"Go ahead on in, Franny. I'll be right along."

She lingered, frowning worriedly, until he smacked a palm against the mare's flank to set her in motion. Loosening his guns in the leather then, Mike stalked toward the little grove.

CHAPTER V

Each Has a Sister

A MAN and woman stood in the shadows of the grove, with a horse picketed in the background, making no move until Mike was quite near. Then his sister Helen broke forward and ran straight at him, crying softly: "Mike, *Michael!*"

He caught her in his arms, but turned his mouth away from her reaching lips. "Not after him, Helen," said Mike, setting her aside and striding on at Lance Whipple, who waited with easy, idle grace and no apparent alarm. Helen tried to cut between them, but Mike brushed her back with his left arm. "What are you doin' here, Lance?" he asked coldly. "With my sister?"

Lance smiled. "Who was that you rode in with, Mike?"

The irony of it twisted Mike's lips into a mirthless grin. "All right, Lance. I see your point. But the posse put you here."

"At my request, Mike. For this reason alone."

"You'll be reporting back to them."

Lance inclined his head. "I haven't seen anything to report, Mike."

"Well, I guess it don't matter. They'll know we're here anyway, and the fight's already started."

"And the odds are pretty heavy against you."

"I could shorten 'em some by taking you," Mike Grail said evenly. "If it's got to come some time, it might as well be now. Helen, go on into the house."

She flung herself upon him. "No, Mike, *no!* There's no call for you two to fight. Lance hasn't done anything against the Diamond G."

"He's a Whipple."

"So is Frances!" she shot back. "What's the difference, Michael? You brought her here. You love her. And I love Lance!"

Mike scowled thoughtfully. "It is kind of complicated. Too damn complicated." He eyed the other man. "You going to fight against us?"

"Not unless I have to," Lance Whipple said. "I've never seen any sense in this feud."

"When Josh killed Kirk it was murder," Mike said through his teeth. "A trained gunslinger against a man who never used guns much."

"I don't uphold Josh. I never did. I had nothing to do with that, or any of the rest of it."

Mike freed himself from Helen and elbowed her back. "Let's get this straight, Lance. If you ever intend to lift a gun against the Diamond G, I'm going to take you here and now."

"You think you could, Mike? Just like that?" There was a faint insolence in Lance's tone and smile.

Mike Grail surged forward at him, and once more Helen hurled herself at her brother and clung frantically to his arms. "Go to the house, Helen!" he ordered in exasperation. "Get out of the way and let us settle this." But Helen shook her blonde head and held on with frenzied strength. Fearful of hurting her, Mike relaxed and looked at Whipple.

"Maybe we ought to keep you here, Lance."

"Maybe I'd like that, Mike. Providing you could do it."

With a sudden explosive burst, Mike broke away from Helen and threw himself at Lance. Lance stepped lithely back and reached for his holster, but Mike shouldered into him and drove him off-balance, smashing him squarely against the bole of a juniper.

Lance's breath whistled out and his mouth came open. He tried to strike back, but Mike's fists were already sloughing low and deep into his abdomen. The handsome face crumpled in agony as Lance doubled under the wicked blows, grunting and groaning the last air out of his lungs.

Mike stepped away and Lance came lurching off the tree trunk, flailing blindly with both hands. Stricken as he was, this

Whipple was not quitting. Mike took the flurry on his arms, shoulders and head. The punches were without steam or authority. Pushing his man off, Mike hit him again, left and right to the jaw. Lance's head sprang far back, crunching on the juniper. As he bounced forward his head sagged, his knees gave, and Lance Whipple fell full length and lay sobbing helplessly on the ground.

"That's all," Mike Grail said, bending over him. "Bring the horse, Helen. I'll carry Lance in."

HE WAS laboring toward the ranch home with Lance over his shoulder, when Helen came up leading Lance's mount. "Why did you have to do that, Mike?" she demanded. "He isn't big enough to fight a raw wild brute like you."

"He's too good with a gun," Mike said, smiling soberly. "Couldn't afford to let him go, Helen. The odds are bad enough as it is."

"Lance wasn't going to fight against us. He's never fought against the Diamond G."

"He might've some time, being a Whipple. What are you kicking about, girl? He's here now where you can see him every day."

"You didn't have to hit him so hard."

"Sure I did, to keep him from getting a gun out. He isn't hurt, kid. Some day you'll thank me for this."

"Perhaps you're right, Mike," she murmured. "Perhaps it was the best way, after all."

At the house, Fran Whipple and Micah Grail were waiting by the back door with Fergus and Halacy standing by. The other horses had been taken care of, and the tall Halacy stepped forward with a grin to lead away this one of Lance's. The broad, stocky Fergus relieved Mike of his dead-weight burden, and the Major told him where to deposit the prisoner. Helen nodded to Fran and followed Fergus inside. Frances drifted after them shortly, leaving father and son alone on the back porch.

They shook hands, firm and hard, their faces grave and drawn against emotion. Mike kept swallowing the painful lump in his throat, and the Major's eyes were blinking rapidly as he spoke:

"I'm glad to have you home, Michael."

"I'm sure glad to be here, Dad."

"You can probably stand a drink and something to eat, Mike."

"Sounds mighty good to me."

The Major put his arm around the boy's shoulders. "Glad you didn't have to kill Lance. It seems to be the real thing with Helen and him. And you and Fran?"

"It's real all right, Dad."

"Let's hope this war doesn't last too long then," said Micah Grail. "It's been years since the Diamond G held open-house. A double wedding would call for quite a celebration, son."

"There's a lot to be done first," Mike said. "You know about Sioux Springs?"

"The boys found the dead cattle. And old Reb Tarrant's grave."

"I'll tell you about it, Dad. Tomorrow we'll ride down the Horse and wipe out those fake homesteads and all that wire. Then I can go after Josh Whipple."

"There'll be gunmen between you and Josh. There's Wallont and Tench and Fruin."

"They'll have to get out or go under."

"They will no doubt be out here after Frances."

"That'll save going in after them, Dad."

The Major smiled and clasped his son in an iron embrace. "The time always comes when this family needs one with the wildness in him—the Unholy Grail."

"I reckon that's me for sure," Mike drawled, grinning.

The Major laughed in quiet delight. "Let's get that drink, Michael, and order up a meal for you and Fran. The Diamond G has come to life again. It has been dead and empty, Mike, boy."

"It's been lonesome where I was too, Dad," said Mike Grail . . .

Fifteen strong the next morning, the Diamond G crew swept down the valley of Horse Creek, Mike Grail riding at the

point between the long, laughing Halacy, and the stocky, silent Fergus. The Major stayed behind with an alert skeleton force to guard the ranch. Helen Grail and Fran Whipple were both ready to man guns, if necessary. Lance was a sulky and disgusted captive in the large stone house.

The homesteads along the stream had been abandoned, the riders discovered. Unopposed, they pulled down the soddies and lean-tos, fired the more substantial shacks, cabins and sheds, cut the wire fences and uprooted the poles. Slashing through claim after claim, leveling every structure and tearing down every fence, they worked their way east, and left clear, open range in their wake.

THE places hadn't been intended for homes anyhow. They had been set up simply to spoil the Grail graze and obstruct the route to Goshen Hole. The earth was strewn with the whitening bones of cattle that had died on the barbwire in last winter's blizzards.

"This is a chore that should've been done long before now," remarked Halacy, and Fergus nodded stolidly in agreement. "But I reckon we was waiting on your coming home, Mike. Bogged down like, we couldn't seem to get rolling whatever."

"They used to keep quite an army along here," Fergus explained. "Whipple gunnies and Hynes' deputies playing homesteaders. Funny they pulled out all of a sudden."

Mike Grail nodded his rusty head. "They'll probably hit us before the day's over. They sure won't take this lying down, Ferg."

"I don't expect so, Mike. Must be cooking up something."

Halacy laughed his reckless laugh. "I been waiting some spell for a crack at them ranahans. Today ought to be the day. My patience's plumb wore out."

"We'll get action before sundown, Hal," promised Mike. "I can feel it coming like a storm."

Fergus smiled one of his rare, solemn smiles. "The Major was ten years younger this morning. You took an awful load off his back, Mike."

"It's about time I did something for him," Mike said, and oddly enough he thought of Rentlen at that instant.

He hoped the detective wouldn't show up before this matter was finished. Mike hated to have to kill the Dutchman, but he would if Rentlen horned in here. Nobody, nothing, was going to keep him from balancing the account against the Whipples. This was the first time Mike Grail's life had had purpose and direction and meaning. All the rest had been aimless waste, chaff on the wind.

CHAPTER VI

Attack in Force

LATE in the afternoon the outfit reached the last deserted claim near the entrance to Goshen Hole, and went to work with wire-cutters and ropes and torches. Fences, posts and pole corral were down, the board shanty and shed burning briskly, when the enemy struck from the timbered south bank of Horse Creek. Struck with the lightning suddenness and speed of attacking Indians.

Caught on foot near the river, young Campbell ran for his horse, but never made it. He pitched on his face as bullets punched into his back. His sorrel screamed and went thrashing down on the bleached turf. His friend, a cowboy named McNeal, rode daringly but foolishly out toward the sprawled boy and ran right into a hail of lead. Horse and man went down riddled, rolling lifelessly in the dusty grass. The hurtling headlong charge was already splashing across the stream, at least thirty horsemen firing as they came.

There was no shelter left about the blazing homestead. Outnumbered more than two-to-one, there was nothing for the Diamond G to do but run for the Hole. Halacy and some of the others were

shooting into the oncoming horde, while Mike and Fergus yelled at them to cut and run for it.

After a frantic interval of plunging, milling chaos, with the air alive with snarling bullets all around them, Mike and Fergus got the men moving. They lined out toward the steep-walled passage to Goshen where there was cover and some chance of fighting off these odds.

Strung out in full flight, with the horses flattened at top speed and the men hunched low in the leather, they hammered madly through boiling dust clouds toward the dark friendly mouth of the Hole. The setting sun was at their backs, and out of its yellow glare whipped the searching lead of the Whipple party. Lead that raked up dirt, plucked at clothing, and seared past the ears of fleeing riders.

Mike, like the rest, rode tensed for the hammer blow that would shock his spine, smash him onto the horse's neck, wrench him from the saddle. Two down already, before they could fire a shot. Campbell and McNeal. Thirteen left with a pack of thirty at their heels and death whining everywhere about them. "Pull up there, Albrecht, keep your head down, Tyroler, don't drop back, Halacy. The Hole's just ahead. They'll never rout us out of there!"

They thundered into the dim corridor at a gallop and fanned for shelter on either side of the pass, flinging themselves off their lathered mounts with carbines in hand. The pursuit kept coming with more resolve than judgment. Mike saw fat Blubber Wallont and little Flicker Fruin and Indian-faced Joe Tench in the front rank as he lined his sights.

Diamond G opened up, filling the cut with a flaming roar and checking that insane onrush. The attackers wavered and veered off, broke and scattered back, leaving two horses and one man motionless on the brown earth. Diamond G went on lashing them with rifle fire, driving them out and away.

Halacy had a boot in the stirrup when Mike hauled him down. "Let 'em come to us, Hal. We aren't strong enough to follow up."

Halacy nodded, with a sheepish grin. "Drunk on powder, I reckon. Like a wet-eared kid on his first time out."

They reloaded and waited behind the boulders and projecting ledges of the embankments. Men drank from canteens, bit off fresh chews of tobacco, and tapered up quick cigarettes. Teeth flashed white in powder-blackened sweat-shining faces.

"Come on in again!" Halacy was pleading, wild blue eyes on the enemy.

"They won't come head-on again, Hal," said Mike. "They'll split and circle over the hills."

"Just so they get here, Mike," said Halacy. "That's Mendoza down out there."

"Don't know how I missed Wallont," muttered Mike. "Out of practice with a saddle-gun, I guess."

The sun had gone now, but the clouds banked above the distant Divide were rimmed with golden fire. Tier on tier over the Rockies, they gave the illusion of loftier ranges massed fabulously and endlessly on the western horizon.

The thirteen men in the pass waited and walked their horses, while the sweat cooled on their bodies and stiffened their clothes. Dusk ran lavender and purple, then full darkness closed in. They waited and watched the rimrock on either side and saw the moon rise in amber glory. But nobody came and nothing happened.

THEY rode out of the mouth of Goshen Hole, wary of ambush, past the dead Mendoza and the two horses, on to the burned-out homestead. Picking up the bodies of McNeal and Campbell, rolling them in blankets, they started the long trek homeward. The attack they constantly expected never came.

"It looks more like Horse Creek anyway," Fergus said. "With them fences and shanties down. Open range again, the way it should be in cattle country."

"And we owe it to Camp and Mac to keep it open," Albrecht said.

"That's right, Al," said Mike Grail soberly. "We'll do it for 'em. Those two boys—" He broke off, cursing bitterly. "It wasn't even their fight."

"Now they wouldn't like that none, Mike," protested Halacy gently. "Diamond G was their brand—and their home."

Mike nodded in humble acceptance of this truth. "I know, Hal, I know."

It was late when they filed wearily through the gate into the ranch yard. No lights showed but the guards were still posted, Micah Grail sat on the gallery with his Henry rifle, and Helen and Fran Whipple were awake within the darkened house.

The Major's fine features went bleak and hard as he observed the blanket-wrapped forms slung across two of the horses. His keen eyes searched the living, in order to identify the dead. He had thought nothing could hurt him again, after the loss of his elder son, but he realized now how wrong he had been. Campbell and McNeal had practically grown up on the Diamond G. The Major had raised them from boyhood. It was like losing two more sons.

The horses cared for, the bodies laid away, the men were drinking coffee and whisky in the ranchhouse kitchen when the hoofbeats of a single rider drummed through the outer stillness. Cup in hand, Mike trailed the Major to the front veranda. It was Cameron's man, Dana., from the Inter-Ocean in Cheyenne, his round face heavy with the news he bore.

Doc Weafer had been shot to death on his own front doorsteps. The assailant was unknown for certain, but everyone suspected Josh Whipple. The reason for the killing—Doc had befriended Mike Grail, and had aided Fran Whipple in escaping with Mike.

"The whole town's fired up over this one," Dana said. "Even Hynes don't dare side the Whipples any more. Josh and the rest of them killers ain't got the protection of the law now. They're fair game for anybody that dares to go after 'em, Major."

"We ride again this morning, Dad," said Mike Grail. "And this trip ought to wind it up and close the book."

He turned back into the house and to Fran Whipple who was waiting in the firelit room. Her clear face mirrored horror when he told her about Doc Weafer. "Joshua's a mad dog, always has been. Oh, Mike, Mike, is it ever going to end?"

Mike Grail nodded grimly, holding her full-rounded figure hard against him. "Another twenty-four hours ought to do it, Franny."

"I'm afraid, afraid, Mike." Her lips lifted hungrily to his. "I've just got you back. I couldn't stand losing you again."

"You're going to lose some relatives maybe," Mike murmured against the sweetness of her mouth. "But not me, Fran, not ever . . ."

ANOTHER evening found the Diamond G riders loping in near Cheyenne, only five this time. Mike Grail with Fergus and Halacy, Albrecht and Tyroler, the top gunhands of the Diamond G. The others had stayed back with the Major to defend the home spread. If the town had got too hot for Josh Whipple, he'd be more than likely to lead a full-scale assault on the Grail ranch. Particularly since he knew Frances and Lance were there, one willing and one unwilling prisoner.

Mike had been summarizing the situation as they racked over the raw broken landscape. On the Whipple side, Thorp and Mendoza were dead, old Moses and big Branch badly wounded, and Lance a captive. That left Josh, Wallont, Tench and Fruin as the most formidable foemen. For the Grail faction, four good men had died—Reb Tarrant, Campbell, McNeal, and Doc Weafer. The Whipples had all the best of it so far. Mike wished he had killed Branch when he had the opportunity.

Cheyenne, they discovered, was still seething over the killing of Dr. Weafer. Hitherto hatred for the Whipples had been subjugated by fear; now it was out in the open and running rampant. But the whereabouts of Josh and his crew were not known. They weren't in any of the saloons or gambling hells or dance halls. They were not at any of the Whipple

stores or homes.

With a chilled, sinking sensation, Mike Grail decided they must be striking for the Diamond G.

Sheriff Hynes and his deputies, thoroughly frightened and subdued, were sticking close to the office in the jailhouse. When questioned by Mike, the sheriff could supply no helpful answers, although his abject attempts at friendliness and sympathy were probably as genuine as anything in the man's hollow existence. There was no doubt that Hynes had broken with the Whipples, once and for all. In shooting Doc Weafer, Joshua Whipple had gone way too far.

"You want to get reelected, Hynes," said Mike with mild contempt, "you ought to be out hunting the killer."

Hynes wagged his head, spread his palms. "I ain't even running again. I don't care about that or nothing else. You want the killer yourself, don't you? Well, you gospel-sure can have him. It's a stinking mess and I'm out of it."

"Too late, Hynes," chided Mike. "You'll never get the stink off you. You'll carry it to the grave."

"Maybe so," mumbled the sheriff, his sallow, pocked face looking aged and caved-in. "But I ain't making it any worse from here on."

"No, it's bad enough as it is," Mike agreed. "It places you with the worst polecats in Wyoming."

Hynes gestured feebly. "Talk, talk. You think you can hurt me by talking?"

Mike regarded him with tolerant scorn. "I reckon not. Just a waste of breath. Happy dreams, Hynes."

He led his four followers from the sheriff's office, and they rode slowly out to the Weafer house, tying their mounts at the rack under which Moses Whipple had tumbled, after his abortive attempt with the shotgun.

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CHAPTER VII

Triple Duel

CONSTANT processions of people were filing in and out of the dim-lighted home, where Weafer had aided and comforted so many of them so many times. There was grief on all the faces, and anger mixed with it in some.

The men from the Diamond G fell into the silent, slow-moving column, eventually entering and passing the casket in which Doc lay waxen-faced and cold, presided over by heartbroken old Gabriel. The Negro clutched pitifully at Mike Grail's arm, and his dry, shuddering sobs made Mike's eyeballs sting and his throat lock tight.

It was a relief to get outside in the fresh night air again. After watching the throngs for a time, they mounted and drifted back into the center of town, eyes roving sharply and right hands close to gun-butts. But neither the Whipples nor their employees were anywhere in view.

At the Inter-Ocean Hotel, Mike left Tyroler and Albrecht outside with the horses and the words, "Your turn'll come in a minute, boys."

The ornate batwings of the barroom entrance parted before Mike Grail, with Fergus and Halacy at his heels, and there, backed to the bar in the place least expected was fat, smiling Blubber Wallont, flanked by waspish little Flicker Fruin and sullen Indian Joe Tench. Except for them and a lone, scared bartender, the room was empty under the great crystal-gleaming chandeliers.

It was so abrupt and unexpected it left the trio frozen breathless in the doorway.

"You boys lookin' for somebody?" Wallont inquired jovially, easing his enormous bulk forward off the bar. Fruin and Tench edged away on either side. "We could of picked you off from cover, but we figure it's more fun this way."

"Where's Josh?" asked Mike, his throat aching dry and cold shivers threading his spine.

"Around somewheres." Wallont gestured carelessly, his moon-face beaming pleasantly. "He told us to take care of you boys. Will you have a drink first? Or do you want to die dry?" Blubber might have been discussing the weather with intimate friends. He was fairly bubbling with jollity, a good-natured, easy-going fat man with a perpetual grin. As harmless looking as a character could be. As swift and deadly as Josh Whipple himself, or nearly so.

"Never mind the drink."

Mike faced Wallont in the center. On his left, the stolid Fergus stood against Flicker Fruin. At the right, lank, lean Halacy smiled into the smoldering bloodshot eyes of surly Joe Tench. Three against three, opponents singled out, the stage set for a triple duel. Mike thought Halacy could take the Indian, but he was afraid Fergus couldn't match Fruin's speed. As for himself, he felt sure of beating the fat man. You had to be sure in this business, or you were soon dead.

Wallont's laugh was the gurgle of oil, his hand a huge blurred streak. Mike Grail's right wrist whipped, the Colt coming up in that hand, leveling off and leaping ablaze. The first shot by a fractional second. Moon-face stupid with surprise, Blubber Wallont rocked ponderously back upon the bar, his bullet going high, tugging at the crown of Mike's hat. Heaving massively forward, Wallont crashed facedown on the sawdusted floor. Mike was already lining and letting go at Flicker Fruin, who had both guns out and roaring.

Flame lashed back and forth in the barroom, and blasting reports beat thunderously at the walls and numbed the eardrums. Glass shattered, woodwork splintered, and smoke wreathed the radiant chandeliers. Halacy had put two .44 slugs in Joe Tench, and the Indian had turned and draped himself headlong over the bar and was dying there. Fergus, hard hit and flung backward by Fruin's lead, whirled into the tall batwing doors, clawed at them, and fell outside on the slat walk.

But Fergus had hit Fruin once, Mike hit him again, and Flicker was down on his knees at the base of the counter, the snarl of a cornered rat on his peaked face. Bowing over a brass cuspidor, he spilled it as he stiffened out with a jerk and lay still in his blood and the oozing filth. In fleeting seconds it was all over.

MIKE GRAIL slammed out through the swing-doors and dropped on his knees beside Fergus. The stocky foreman was unconscious, had a smashed shoulder, but he would live.

Mike was straightening up when a bullet burred past him and raised a fountain of wood fragments and dust. The boom came from overhead, and was echoed by a lower and nearer explosion. A scream sounded above. There was the hurtling rush of a body falling, apparently from a third-floor window in the hotel, and the sodden sickening smash of it striking the solid ground.

On his feet, every nerve flayed raw and jittering frenetically, Mike spun and stared at the broken shapeless corpse. Prosper Whipple, no longer suave and slick and polished. Sniping from an upstairs window, typical of Prosper. Mike turned to see who had picked off this Whipple, and came face to face with heavy-shouldered square-jawed Dutch Rentlen, the Pinkerton agent.

Mike reached for his holster, but Rentlen shook his head. Mike said, "Don't try to take me, Dutch."

"I don't want you, Grail," said Rentlen. "Don't flatter yourself. I'm after bigger game, boy."

"For instance?"

Rentlen waved at Prosper's crumpled body. "Investigating the Whipples. I suggest you ride for the Diamond G. I'll take care of your wounded man and the dead —and the town."

"*You* got him, Dutchman?"

Rentlen nodded gravely. "A pretty shot too, for a hand-gun. The man you want headed for Horse Creek with his crew.

You'd better hurry, Mike."

"Thanks, Dutch."

Mike spoke briefly to Fergus, hoisted Halacy from the foreman's side, and started for the horses. An excited crowd had gathered, and they had to fight their way through the jammed surging ranks. Albrecht and Tyroler were grumbling and swearing by the hitch-rail.

"They had us ringed in out here when the shooting started," Tyroler said. "Four of 'em on us. They just melted away when they saw how it was going, and that big jasper shot the one out of that third-story window."

"It's all right, boys," Mike said. "Ferg got it in the shoulder, but he'll pull through. Now we've got some more riding to do. Josh Whipple took his crew out toward the Diamond G."

"Prosper would of had you sure, Mike, if that stranger hadn't knocked him off that windowsill." Albrecht shook his blond head. "Who is that big-shouldered hombre anyway?"

Mike Grail smiled. "A detective named Rentlen. An old friend of mine . . ."

The attack on the Diamond G came in the early morning blackness between moonset and dawn. The spread seemed to be deep in slumber, but the Whipple riders ran into withering rifle fire when they started moving in.

Josh and Bloomer tried to keep the assault moving, but their hired hands had little stomach for it. That position was too strong for even their superior numbers to carry. The ranchhouse was like a great stone fortress, and the Major had stationed sharp-shooting outguards in strategic spots among the outer buildings.

The raiders made one attempt mounted and another afoot, neither getting anywhere. With higher morale and spirit they might have infiltrated on foot, but the gunnies didn't feel that their wages warranted any such suicidal effort.

They had been uncomfortable ever since Mike Grail's return to the South Platte country. They were uneasy about Josh Whipple since the cold-blooded killing of Doc Weafer, and the resultant turning of public opinion against them all. They hadn't wanted to charge the Diamond G this morning, any more than they had wanted to move into Goshen Hole the other afternoon.

MOST of the defensive shooting was done by the outposts, because the enemy never got in real close. The Major managed to get in a few shots with his Henry from the main house, but derived only a meager satisfaction from this. After the foot attack had been repulsed, he dispatched orders to the outlying riflemen to let them in next time, and then slash them to pieces with crossfire. But there was no next time. The Whipple force failed to mount another offensive.

Joshua, seconded by Bloomer, railed and blustered, pleaded and cajoled, to no avail. These mercenaries were through attacking.

"There ain't more'n a dozen men in that whole dressed-up shebang!" Josh Whipple said, the fury growing to madness within him. His long-jawed coyote-face was livid with it, his strange pale eyes shining like phosphorous in the dark.

"That's enough," declared a rider named Pruett. "Enough to hold that rockbound fort against a regiment of cavalry. Thirty of us ain't going to make even a dent in it."

"They must of sent their best guns into Cheyenne," argued Josh. "Blubber and the boys'll take care of 'em there. And here's this layout begging to be taken, if I only had men with me instead of jackass rabbits!"

"It don't act it to me," Pruett protested. "Whoever's in there can shoot pretty fast and straight. And I ain't so sure Blubber and them'll ever take Mike Grail and his bunch."

"Shut up!" rasped Josh. "Shut up before you make me sick enough to shoot you, Pruett. I must of been deaf, dumb and blind when I put you on the payroll!"

Pruett started to speak and stopped short, as hoofbeats floated up from Horse

Creek. In a few minutes a lone rider, one of their men, called Okie, drew up on a foaming, jaded, half-dead cayuse. "Dead, all dead!" Okie panted. "Wallont and Pruin. Tench and Prosper Whipple. Dead, every one of 'em."

"See?" Pruett crowed. "See what I told you?"

Josh Whipple drew and shot Pruett out of his saddle, wheeled his own mount and dashed madly away into the darkness. Bloomer took off after him without a word. The others sat their horses and looked dumbly at one another. After a space somebody got down and threw the dead Pruett across his pony's back and roped him there. Then they started back down the valley of the Horse, a stunned, silent and beaten company, dragging along without aim or interest.

CHAPTER VIII

The Damnedes Double Wedding

EARLY morning mists still shifted and hovered on the lowlands as the four Diamond G riders mounted the long uneven slope, passed through the dense gloom of a pine grove, and emerged on that broad bench over Sioux Springs. Young Tyroler and Albrecht were well ahead, with Halacy and Mike Grail bringing up the rear. Mike noticed once more the bright growth of buttercups and verbena that had caught Fran's eye the night old Reb Tarrant died.

The boys in front had reined up to wait on the edge of the shelf when suddenly they set up a cry and plunged over the rim and out of sight. Spurring quickly forward, Mike and Halacy saw them racing to intercept a pair of riders who were heading for the pine-shaded knoll on which Tarrant's cabin stood.

Josh Whipple was the first one, with Bloomer bucketing along behind him. Mike's heart lifted and swelled and started to hammer wildly. He and Halacy slid their mounts down the steep grade toward the newly fenced-in water-hole and joined in the chase.

The distance closed between the two pairs of horsemen ahead, and they opened fire with their six-guns without lessening the reckless pace. There wasn't quite time for Albrecht and Tyroler to cut off the others. Josh and Bloomer were going to gain that rock-girt hummock, and it would be a dangerous and difficult task to get in there and smoke them out.

Josh was already bounding up the incline toward safety, but Bloomer had fallen back at the bottom, and Tyroler threw a bullet into his laboring pinto. The paint cartwheeled in a shower of dirt. Bloomer fell clear, rolling like an acrobat, and came up shooting, but the blond Albrecht was driving in at him with .44 aflame. Bloomer jerked and twisted into a leaning lunging run, tripped sprawling over a rock and remained there without further movement.

Josh Whipple had vanished into the pines by this time. Albrecht swung off to make sure of his victim, and was nodding with quiet satisfaction when the others pulled up alongside. All they had to do now was surround that wooded knob and move in on Josh Whipple. Merely a matter of time and patience.

Josh knew this as well as they did. Mike gave terse instructions, stressing the importance of not taking chances, and they started to encircle the hump in order to advance simultaneously on all four sides. They had it boxed in, their horses tethered in shelter, and were closing in on foot, when Josh's hoarse mocking voice came out to them:

"Come in alone, Mike! Just you and me, kid. This is our fight, ain't it? You scared to stand up to me and settle it man-to-man?"

"You've got all the cover in there, Josh."

"I won't use it none. I want to get you in the open."

"Come out here," called Mike. "I'll take you alone, Josh. The others won't mix in."

Josh Whipple laughed. "I ain't that

much of a fool, kid! Even if I win I lose, that way."

"No! If you beat me they'll let you go."

"You know better'n that, boy!" Josh laughed.

"Shut up then!" Mike yelled. "We'll all move in on you."

"I thought you was more of a man than that, Mike. I thought you had guts enough to fight your own battles. Your brother Kirk didn't cry for no help!"

That did it, of course. Mike shouted, "Stand out where I can see you, Josh, and I'll come up!"

"Don't be a fool, Mike," protested Halacy. "We've got him nailed down. You don't have to risk anything like that."

"I want him myself, Hal," said Mike Grail. "I've got to get him myself. You boys hold back until it's over."

Josh Whipple stepped into view amidst pine-darkened boulders at the crest, a towering lanky figure with long, loose-hanging arms and a grinning triangular face. Mike moved forward, striding steadily up the brush-tangled rock-scattered slope, his gray-green eyes fixed on his enemy.

CLIMBING slowly, easy but watchful, the morning sun warmed Mike's back and the sweat started, dampening his armpits, beading his upper lip and forehead. The smell of raw red earth and sage and stone gave way to the clean fragrance of pines as he ascended. Within easy revolver range now, Josh still stood motionles as an elongated statue above him. "He wants me," Mike thought. "If he can get me, he don't care about the rest or what happens to him. A real killer, Joshua. But I've got a lot more to get him for. A lot more to live for, too. Which can be a disadvantage in a deal like this."

Josh pulled down his hatbrim against the sun's rising glare, and Mike moved even slower to keep his pulse and his breathing as normal as possible. The little things could make all the difference. He wondered which was worse, the waiting at a standstill or the walking uphill. Just as well to be walking, he decided, if you didn't hurry too much. Either way the pressure was on you and increasing every second.

Josh Whipple cracked first under the intolerable strain. His draw was lightning and he was diving for shelter as he fired downslope. The bullet clipped a twig close to Mike Grail's head, as he hit the dirt behind the nearest boulder, his own right-hand Colt leaping into his clawed fingers. Pain stabbed the old wound in his side.

Swearing disgustedly he crawled to the far end of the rock, anger swelling to red-hot but controlled rage in him. Josh

[*Turn page*]

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couldn't play it fair, he had to cheat a little. Instead of being over quickly, it would take time now. Perhaps a long time. And Mike was in no mood for a slow, stalking drawn-out duel.

Stone dust spurted into his face with a screech of lead, as Mike peered around the edge. Targeting on the flash, Mike thumbed off a shot to pin Josh down, and moved forward himself, crouching low and weaving from rock to rock up the grade.

He bore to the right to flank Josh's position and flush him out.

Another burst of stone splinters stung his cheek when he flattened in back of a triangular boulder. Unable to halt Mike's steady relentless advance, Whipple was a bit panicky, losing his professional poise and wasting lead. But coming mighty close with most of them. Too close for comfort.

Firing again, Mike slashed onward and slid head-first behind a windfall, with Josh's slug spouting wood splinters over him. Rage and hate made Mike reckless, sent him racing forward once more, and Whipple was breaking backward now, dodging back toward Tarrant's cabin in the clearing.

Bent low, with long legs driving, Mike fired on the run and rammed through a thicket of buckbrush to reach the summit. Sweating hard now, his face greasy and dripping with it, his shirt soaked and plastered to his shoulders. Two shells left in his right-hand gun. His right side torn with agony.

Then, as both men jockeyed for positions among the sandstone outcroppings of the rim, a lane opened suddenly and fleetingly between them, leaving them crouched face to face at last. Flame blossomed with a blended roar, the muzzle-lights merging in sun-and-shadow. Mike Grail felt the hot breath of death and saw Josh's lank form lifted and turned by the walloping .44.

Whipple went down out of sight. Mike lunged straight ahead until a blinding explosion stopped him. Panting behind a log, he heard Josh thrashing in retreat, hit hard and trying to gain the sanctuary of the log hut.

Rising, ripping through undergrowth and hurdling boulders, Mike ducked under low pine boughs into the clearing. Josh Whipple leaned slackly at the corner of the cabin, guns in either hand, a dark stain spreading on his hickory shirt.

They let go together, Josh's low shots raking needle-mold across Mike's boots. Mike lifted and lined his left-hand Colt, felt it spring violently as the fire torched out. Smashed and buckling on the wall, Josh Whipple lurched forward on spraddled sagging legs, coyote-face shocked and ghastly, running with sweat. Mouth gaping, head turning in vague protest, Josh Whipple sank whimpering backward and died at the foot of the log wall.

MIKE GRAIL wheeled and walked back the way he had come, the guns swinging and smoking in his big hands. Wearily, drunkenly, he walked down the slope to where the other three men waited with strained eyes and anxious faces.

"You ain't even hit, Mike?" said Halacy, wonderingly and thankfully. "All that shooting. We sure thought you was both dead."

"Took a lot of killing," Mike muttered dully. "He sure died hard."

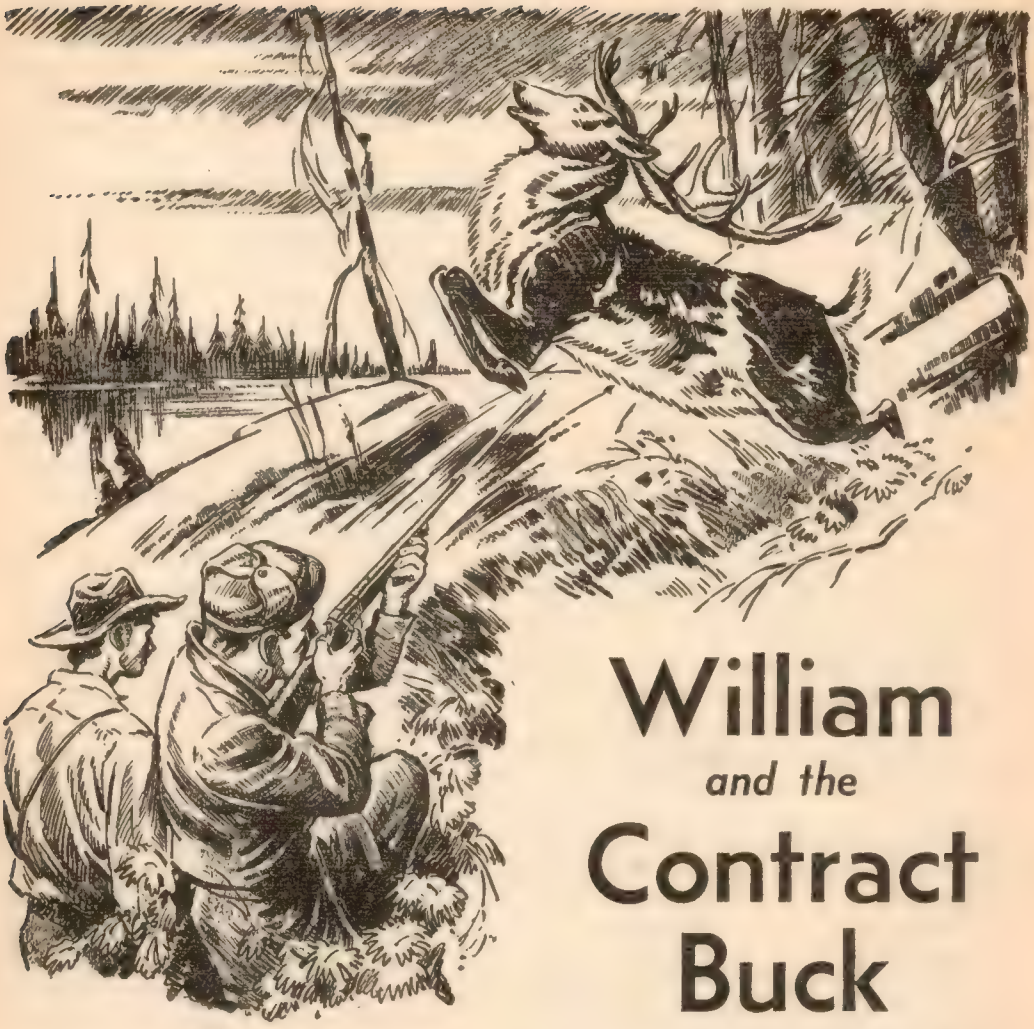
"I reckon that does it," Halacy said. "We can run cattle in peace again and live without fear."

Mounting up, they rode toward Diamond on the headwaters of the Horse, and Mike Grail thought this was his real homecoming. No more wars to fight, and Fran Whipple waiting there for him with his father and sister.

"What we going to do with Lance?" asked Halacy, after a few miles.

"Helen will take care of him all right," Mike said, smiling gauntly. "There's liable to be a double wedding and a big jamboree at the Diamond G. The damnedest double wedding in the history of Wyoming, boys. Two Whipples and two Grails."

William dropped the buck with one shot



William *and the* Contract Buck

By JIM KJELGAARD

AFTER the hunting season opened my brother, William, had taken to his bed of pain only on Sunday, when it is not legal to hunt. Annie, William's wife, and I, were glad to see him get one day of rest. We never objected to doing the work on the farm because my brother has so many ailments.

Besides, I owe William a great deal. He has taken care of me for six years, since our father died when I was four. William has always been very kind to me. Just listen to this:

My brother William might be lazy, but he was nobody's fool—or so I figured, anyway, till he ran afoul a gang of city slickers

The last day of rabbit season I was chopping wood when William came home with six snowshoe rabbits, the legal limit. He stopped to watch me work and then,

"Gregory," he said, "a boy like you should not be handling that ax."

"Why, William?" I asked him.

"The handle is too long for your little arms," said William. "Go saw four inches off it."

When I finally went into the house, Annie was skinning the rabbits. William lay on the couch. He had already cleaned his gun and put it away; sick as that man is he lets no one else touch his hunting and fishing gear. Annie was saying,

"My, William, these rabbits will be real handy! I'll can them and we'll have a lot to put away for the winter."

"Little girl!" said William. "My dear little girl! Even though unkind fate keeps me on a bed of pain much of the time, I like to think that I contribute something to my family!"

"You do!" said Annie. "Do you think you'll get more?"

"Certainly," said William. "Deer season opens tomorrow and I will get a buck."

Annie made supper, and while Annie and I washed the dishes William stayed on the couch. After everything was done, he sat up.

"I think I'll go down to Silliman's, my love," he told Annie. "Give me thirty-five cents. No, you had better make that thirty-six. Would you care to walk along, Gregory?"

SILLIMAN'S is kind of a store, gas station, and things like that, down at the cross roads near Willow Creek. The men from our end of Grass County go there when they have no other place to go, and I was very glad William had asked me to go along. The first thing we saw when we came to Silliman's was all the shiny cars around the place, but that was natural because deer season was about to open and deer hunters like to come to Grass County.

William and I pushed our way into Silliman's. It was crowded with hunters and all of them were smoking, so that the inside looked something like a forest fire and smelled worse. I did not mind that, especially since William stopped in front of the counter and I knew he was going to buy me something.

"Gregory," he said, "you can have anything you want as long as it does not cost more than a penny."

"I'll have," I said, looking at all the things in the counter, "a licorice whip."

William pounded the counter so hard that a couple of boxes of mint candy fell over.

"Silliman!" he hollered. "Silliman!"

Jay Silliman walked behind the counter. "You here again?" he asked.

"None of your lip, and give the boy a licorice whip," said William.

William put his odd penny on the counter and Silliman gave me a licorice whip. It was real good, but I only licked it because I did not want it to go too fast. Then somebody yelled,

"William!"

I looked at the counter where Silliman sells beer and saw Tom Horner there with about a dozen others. They wore hunting clothes but, except for Tom, they were all city men. I felt a bit queer because Tom does not like William and is always playing some mean trick on him. When William walked down to Tom, I followed.

"Here," Tom said to the man beside him, "is the person you're looking for. He is good old William, and he knows more about Grass County deer than the deer do."

I looked at the man and I did not like him any better than I did Tom. There was something about him that reminded me of a mean dog, and I can spot one of those every time.

The man shoved a beer into William's hand. William drank it, and the man gave him another and still another. All of it was free because William did not lay down a penny of his thirty-five cents, and after he had had his fourth beer all twelve of the city hunters crowded around him. Tom Horner slipped away, grinning

as he does just after he had played a real mean trick, and I was afraid for William. I did not dare say anything.

"So you," the first man said, "are the best guide in Grass County?"

"That I am," said William, "and I will have another beer."

"Sure, sure," about ten beers were shoved at William and he began to drink them one by one. The man said, "You're just what we're looking for. How about guiding us?"

"I am," said William, "particular about people I guide."

"We're pretty particular about the fellow who guides us. We aren't looking for ordinary deer. All we want is big ones."

"Those," said William, "are the only kind I ever hunt."

Just then I felt a tap on my shoulder and I looked around at old Pete Beamish. Pete really is the laziest man in Grass County—he never works. But he does feel kindly towards William, and Pete said so only I could hear,

"Get William out of this."

"Why?"

"Those hunters," said Pete, "are lookin' for a sucker. That's why Tom backed out. They want some fool to guarantee 'em big deer, and that's all they'll pay for. If they shoot little ones, William won't get any pay, and you know yourself that there's a hundred little ones for every big 'un."

THAT would be bad. We really need the game and fish William brings in. Of course, if William guided, we could always buy stuff with the money he got, but this way we wouldn't get anything. I touched his sleeve.

"William—"

"Don't bother me now, Gregory. There is a big deal on."

"But—"

"Gregory, I do *not* wish to be bothered."

It was no use. They were making a fool of William and all I could do was watch. The man said,

"Then it's all settled?"

"That it is," said William. "For every buck with twelve or more points, I get twenty-five dollars. Otherwise, nothing. Shall we put that in a contract?"

"Let's."

"Silliman!" William yelled.

Silliman came, and William said, "Get two sheets of paper and write what I tell you. Then notarize it" —Silliman is also justice of the peace. Silliman got the two sheets, and William said "Write it this way, Silliman: 'Agreement made this day between the undersigned. "I, William, agree to take them deer hunting. They agree to pay me twenty-five dollars for every deer with twelve or more points brought down—' No, make that fourteen or more points! I'm no piker! 'For any buck with less than fourteen points, I, William, get no pay.' "

Silliman wrote it just the way William had said it. Then William and the twelve men signed both papers and William tucked one into his wallet. William was just a little unsteady on his feet when he faced the hunters.

"Be at my farm at half past six tomorrow," he said. "We will start from there. My brother Gregory—Gregory, my brother, will go with us."

Even the notion that William was going to take me deer hunting did not keep me from sleeping poorly and being miserable that night. My brother had put himself in a very bad hole. I have lived in Grass County all my life without seeing more than two fourteen-point bucks. I just hated the men who had been so crafty and taken such mean advantage of my brother's generous nature! But there was nothing I could do about it. I would have to go along with William, knowing all the while that Annie, William, and I, would get nothing at all.

Still, when we ate breakfast, William seemed cheerful. About the time we finished eating, the men came with two cars which they parked in the yard. William spoke from the porch.

"Follow me, men."

William started up the valley behind our house, and I walked along beside him. It was nice, just cold enough with-

out being too cold. It was not bad just to be out, even if William and Annie and I would get nothing.

"Where are we going?" I asked my brother.

"The pines on Goose Hill," he said.

I did not say any more. The pines on Goose Hill are small, not much higher than William's head, and they are thick. It is very hard to hunt among them, though a lot of game hangs out in the pines. Day had just broken when we got to them.

The pines covered the whole side of Goose Hill, like a big green carpet. William wet his finger in his mouth, caught the wind direction, then tallied off eight of the twelve men.

"Give us forty-five minutes," said my brother, "then space yourselves from the bottom to the top of the slope and drive up the valley."

I might explain that a deer drive is when some hunters holler through deer cover while others try to head off any deer that might come through. It takes an expert—somebody who really knows deer cover—to place the watchers where they can head the deer off; but William is an expert.

WILLIAM took me, and the four men, about a quarter of a mile up the valley and cut into the pines. William left a man near the valley, put another about a quarter of the way up, another about halfway, and the fourth just under the top of the hill. Then, in spite of his ailments, William ran to the top. He raced down it to a growth of aspen, and stopped. I knew better than to make any noise because that would scare the deer.

Five minutes afterwards, the drivers opened up. We could hear them yelling, and both of us stood real still. Then I caught a flash of gray among the pines. A second later I saw the biggest buck I have ever seen. He stopped, looking towards the drivers. Then he came on, and he was about fifty yards away when William dropped him with one shot.

I ran down, and I haven't been that surprised since our black cow had four calves. I had never seen such a lashing big buck. Eight points on each antler he had, a sixteen pointer. William dressed him out while the hunters started yoo-hooing to find where we were. William called back, and in maybe twenty minutes they were all gathered around us.

"My!" said the man who had made the deal with William. "That is a buck!"

"It sure is," said William. "Now all you have to do is carry him out. I cannot help because my back is weak."

William hacked down an aspen. Then he tied the buck's feet together and slid his pole between them. William and I walked behind while the twelve men took turns packing the buck down to our house. But it was only when they started to tie him onto one of the cars that William spoke.

"Leave him lay. That's my buck."

"Your buck?" said the man.

"That's right. I got him."

It was then I remembered how many times my brother had hunted those pines, and how much chance he'd had to find out everything about them. He'd used those men to drive for him!

"Why you dirty—" the man started to say.

William brought his rifle up and cocked it. He held it with his right hand while with his left he fished for his wallet. William pried a paper out of it.

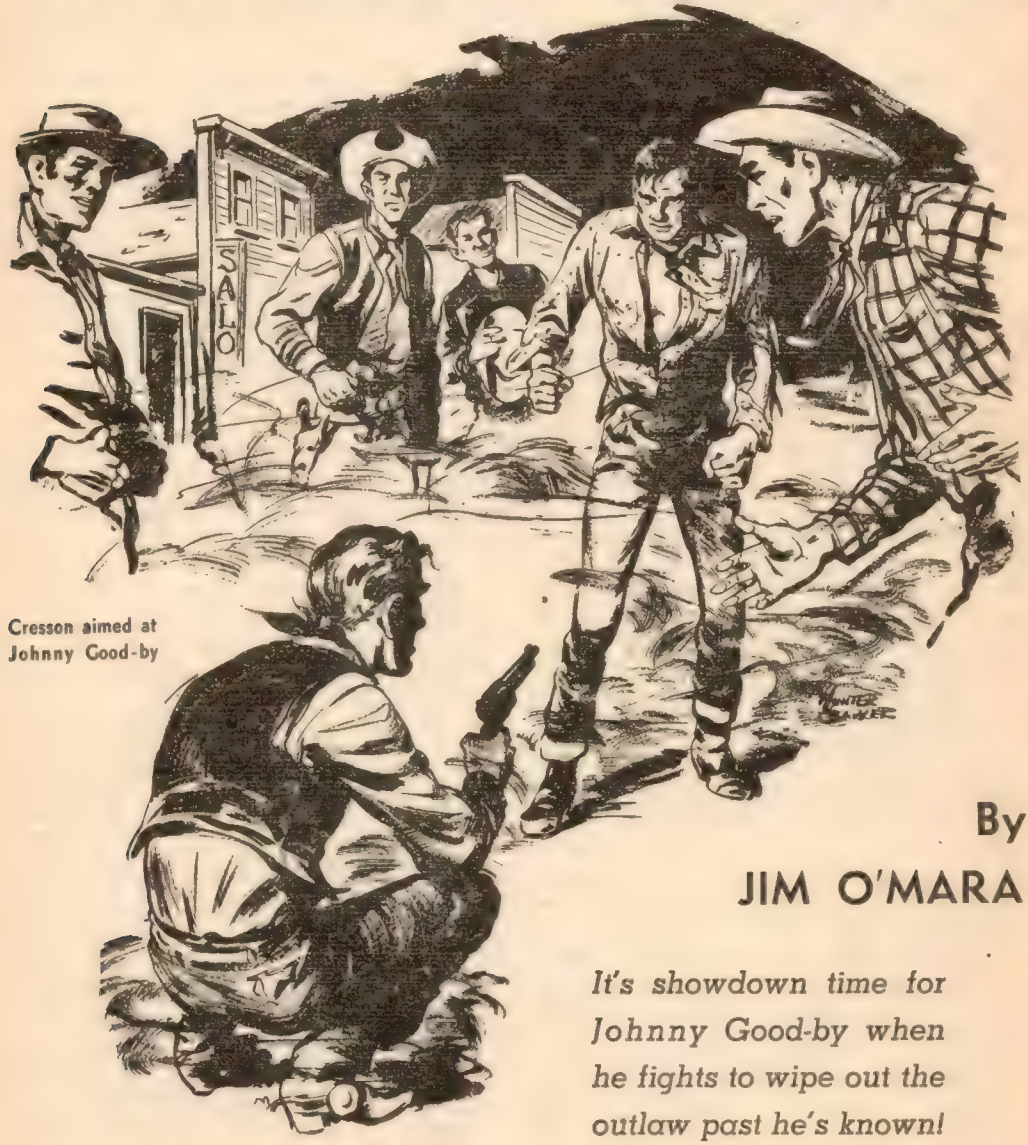
"Leave my buck right there," he said. "Do not call me names, and do not forget your obligations. This contract has been notarized and we all signed it, saying I get paid for every deer we bring down if it's got fourteen points or more.

"Pay me!"

COMING IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

TRAIL WITHOUT END, a Novelet by JOSEPH WAYNE

When the Sun Goes Down



Cresson aimed at Johnny Good-by

By JIM O'MARA

It's showdown time for Johnny Good-by when he fights to wipe out the outlaw past he's known!

NOW, in two seconds after the marshal had spoken, Johnny Battle was right back where he had been a year ago, and all the elements of this moment were remembered ones: the way the two punchers down the bar stiffened and eased their drinks back down to the wood; the abrupt stillness at the playing tables along the wall in back of him; the silence and the waiting. Something good had ended for him here, and its going left him hollowed-out and weak.

He made this summation of the mo-

ment with an isolated corner of his mind, and then he turned to face the big man wearing the star on his vest. With low bitterness he asked, "How did you find out, Cresson?"

"Never mind. Just clear out of town as fast as you can." And the way Cresson bit it off left no limiting conditions attached.

In the sober stiffness of the faces in the bar, Johnny saw that they expected defiance from him. It was a part of the formula in this warped pattern of violence, but he could not find it. Instead, he presently murmured, "What if I don't go?"

"Then I'll see if what they always said about you was true. Johnny Battle, bah! Johnny Good-by—the fastest thing on the draw since Bill Bonney." Cresson's slate-grey gaze grew fine and speculative. "I often wondered about you, Good-by—and where you went when you dropped from sight."

Johnny heard the words, but he was thinking what a fool he had been to believe that he could leave the past down his back trail. You rode over a hill, and there it was—ahead of you. You hid, and it relentlessly searched you out, permitting no amends, demanding settlement in full of all accounts, even if they must be paid with another's happiness.

"I haven't worn a gun since I've been here," he said earnestly. "That's all done with."

"It's no use, Good-by," Cresson growled. "The town doesn't want your kind."

"Maybe they don't want the kind I *was*," Johnny said. "But you don't fool me. What you mean is that Janie Harding doesn't want *your* kind."

Cresson colored slowly, but his control was an even, continuing thing. He said, a bit thickly, "You've got until sundown. If you're here when the sun goes down, you'll be dead when it comes up again." He stared at Johnny, then wheeled and strode toward the door, shouldering his way out into the street.

Johnny Battle watched the swing doors oscillate and grow still. He was a slim, red-haired kid whose good-natured face sometimes looked twice his twenty-odd years, and one of those times was now. His blue eyes were grave and troubled, and his mouth, which could smile easily, was drawn pretty grim at this moment.

This was the end of the long hope for Johnny, that long hope for the future that was forty years—forty years of living in the same place with Janie, among the same people who would accept and respect them both. Working at the same business, going to the same church, and watching his children begin lives of their own. Forty years of doing ordinary things in an ordinary way, until he and Janie had done their share, and, one night during sleep, would peacefully become one with the vastness and the mystery which spread above them and this land. Now, that could not be.

AS JOHNNY turned, the bartender came forward, poured a drink and set the bottle down. "On the house," he said quietly. "I'll buy for Johnny Good-by any day."

He was an old man with a saddle of white hair brushed across a bald spot. He had come west with the railroads. He had been a friend of Johnny's since the day Johnny had come to town. Now he shook his head sympathetically.

"You fooled me, kid. Runnin' your saddle shop, puttin' money in the bank, goin' to church—not much like the fellow I heard about."

Johnny refused the drink with a wry smile. "Sure, Frank," he said. "I was smart! I fooled everybody but myself."

"You oughtn't to have talked to that Texas boy who trailed up yesterday," Frank said. "For that matter, you were a fool to settle down at a rail-head."

Johnny knew that, had known it since the day he rode into the dusty, false-fronted main street of Medicine Hat over a year ago, with the fiery *fracaso* of the Sherman City hold-up behind him, and Al and Joey Compton dead and the gang split up. Medicine Hat was a long way from Sherman City. But seeing the saloons and honky-tonks stretching away from the railroad, up toward the center of the town, he knew that he couldn't off-saddle here for long. The trail herds would bring men who knew of Johnny Good-by.

Yet, somehow, the days had piled up as he waited. He was dog-weary of flight, of crouching in caves or thickets while the posse went by scant yards away while his heart hammered in his throat. And other things had come over him: the awakening memory of simpler things out of a lost boyhood, aroused by what he saw north of the saloons and dance halls: children romping before nice houses, the music of an old song at evening, the church steeple white against the sky, the choir singing a hymn as he lingered past the church on Sunday. These things had gripped him and made him hate to move on. And so, finally, he'd put his guns away, bought the harness shop and started going to church, trying to forget the past, and looking into a new future. Then he'd met Janie, and the future took on a specific shape.

"I settled here because I liked it," he told Frank. "And I talked to that kid because he was a friend, once."

"I know." Frank swabbed morosely at the bar. "That's why Cresson killed him. Of course, the kid *was* a little drunk, but he got to telling the marshal how there was a man in town could fade him with a log chain on his wrist." He shrugged. "You understand, the kid didn't mean to harm you."

"I understand," Johnny said, almost savagely.

The measured ticking of the clock came through the silence. Frank said musingly, "Everybody in town'll know by now. How about Janie?"

The thought pinched Johnny's insides. She had accepted him for what the town believed him to be—an honest, right-living man, and on the strength of that fact they had tried to open the town to her, too. But dance hall girls were not considered much, even though they worked in the deadfalls as an alternative to starving. And so they had taken the snubs and the vacant stares as they sat together in the congregation, and Janie had tried not to show the hurt. "Some day they'll know," she often told Johnny. "They'll take us for what we are—good people trying to live right." There was only one thing wrong with that, he now thought bleakly: he'd begun a little too late.

"She'll take it hard," he told Frank bitterly. "Why wouldn't Cresson let this ride? It's her he's trying to hurt, because she turned him down. He's spread lies about her ever since we started going together."

Frank shook his head. "You see this all wrong. Cresson has his own rep. He was hired to clean up this town because he could fade most of the tough ones. Now they're dead, and he's alive. A man who plays that kind of a game has got to be faster on the draw than anyone else. You can't stay here and not face him. He's got to find out."

"Oh, gosh," Johnny groaned. "The last thing I'd do is give him trouble. You know the town doesn't feel the way he does."

"Listen, kid," Frank said deliberately. "When you walk out that door, you're in a place you've never seen before. They've got their fears, too. They hired Cresson to keep out people like Johnny Good-by." Then he saw the shadow cross Johnny's face. "I'm just tellin' you this because I'm your friend."

Johnny didn't say anything. He stared moodily at the bar, while inside him, hands beat wildly at stone walls. Frank studied his troubled face and presently said, "You don't have to leave town just because he told you to."

"No," Johnny said bitterly. "I can kill him and then run for it again. Or I can let him make a sieve out of me. A fine thing for Janie, either way!"

THE barkeep's gaze turned toward the window. Riders were passing up and down the street, pedestrians clumping along the plank walks. Straight across the way a Mexican boy was sweeping the litter from The Trail, readying for the night's business. But here in the coolness of Frank's saloon, the sun-baked heat of the street seemed far away.

"The sun drops behind the Medicines at about six," Frank said musingly, and his glance went up to the clock. Johnny's gaze followed. Four fifteen. They looked at one another steadily, then their glances parted.

"That puts shadow through the street out there," Frank said. "I guess you'd call it sundown."

"I guess so," Johnny said tonelessly. He shoved away from the bar, a tired motion, and started toward the door.

After three steps, Frank called to him, softly insistent, "What are you going to do, Johnny?"

Johnny stopped short. He turned and looked at Frank for a long, perplexed moment. "I wish to God I knew!" he muttered. Then he went out.

On the boardwalk he paused, scowling at the dusty street, and then he took out the makings and curled up a cigarette. As he lit it and pulled smoke down inside, he saw a group of people down the way watching him. Presently he went that way, and they dispersed abruptly and with an obvious over-casualness. He remembered how often he had stopped to pass the time of day with these same people, and now he went toward the bank feeling alone and strange in this place.

Charley Walton was the banker and the Mayor of Medicine Hat, and he was a deacon in the church. As Johnny came in without knocking he looked up, startled, and Johnny knew that he had heard the news. Some perverse urge made him say sardonically, "Don't worry, Mr. Walton. It's not a hold-up. Just business."

Walton colored. "Certainly, Johnny." Then, "I—I heard about the trouble."

"No trouble," Johnny said. But pride and a growing anger asked why a year of honest association with these people meant nothing in the face of the suddenly risen past.

"I want to sign both my account and the business over. to my girl, Janie Harding," he told Walton. "Can you fix up the papers?"

"Why, I suppose so," Walton's voice was troubled. "But—well, it's almost closing time." He looked up at the wall clock. Half past four. Walton and Johnny stared at one another, and the banker's gaze grew uncomfortable. "Johnny," he said abruptly, "why are you doing this?"

"You know why. And she's the one should have it. Can you help me?"

Walton waited a moment longer, then went out into the bank and returned presently with some papers on which he scribbled, then shoved toward Johnny for signature. When Johnny had signed them, Walton carefully blotted them and put them in his desk.

"That's a good deal of money," he said. "You've worked hard for it."

"It'll be in good hands," Johnny said emphatically. "As good hands as there are in this town, Mr. Walton. Why haven't people realized that?"

The banker cleared his throat and was about to speak when a man came in. He wore a frock coat faded rather green, and a string tie, and he carried with him an air of weariness that was not physical. Doc Trumball nodded to Johnny, stepped to the banker's desk and laid a paper on it.

"Death certificate of that puncher Cresson perforated last night." He looked down at Walton, shaking his head. "Some day I'll call one of his corpses what it is: plain, unadulterated murder."

"Now, Doc," Walton said unhappily, "he does his job. As long as the trail drives come here, there'll be occasional trouble."

"Does it always have to end with another notch on that fellow's gun?" Walton's lips drew tight. Doc continued: "Besides, from what I hear, the drives are about ended, here."

"How's that?"

"That outfit that came up yesterday is going to drive farther west next time. Moreover, they're going to warn the others that there's a kill-crazy marshal here." He paused. "I can't say I blame them."

Frowning, Walton looked down at the paper. "It'll ruin business. Those herds bring money. How about the commission agents, the merchants?"

"How about that boy's folks back in Texas?"

"No matter. We can't have the tough element taking over." Walton looked squarely at Johnny, then said to Doc, "A town grows on money, remember that."

Doc had walked to the door, and now he turned. "The trouble," he said, "is that you people think that evil can be good, as long as it's profitable. You've even got a murderer representing what you call law and order. Walton, you're all mixed up!" With that he left, and after a moment Johnny followed, leav-

ing the banker staring angrily and uncertainly at the door.

Doc was waiting before the bank. As Johnny hauled up beside him, he murmured, "So you were a wild one, too."

IT GAVE Johnny a wrench, now, but he clamped his lips shut. The shadows, he saw, had begun to reach out into the street from the buildings on the west side. Watching them, and feeling the first coolness of the dying day, he found no precise answer for Doc.

"I used my gun to keep alive," he finally said. "Honest to God, I did. But there's a dogging way they all want to try a fellow out after he's come through one fight—" he stopped, and his gaze went to the tops of the stores opposite, where the sun's flaming edge had begun to reach down toward cover. Doc saw that look.

"If it's any use to you," he said gently, "Janie's a good woman. I know that."

"That's fine, Doc. Just fine. Why didn't you tell this whole town?"

Doc waited a full three seconds. "I always liked you, Johnny," he said finally. "I believe that most people in this town are for you. But that business of Janie—I could no more fight that battle for you than they could take your gun and go out to meet Brand Cresson." Then he went on up the street.

Johnny crossed over the way, angling toward an alley leading to the blacksmith shop. Anse Worden, the smith, laid aside his hammer and thrust a cherry-red shoe into the cooling tub. His ham-like paw wiped soot from his grimy face and he said, a little too heartily, "Johnny! How's things?"

"Haven't you heard?" Johnny asked in mock surprise. "They want me to run for Governor of the Territory."

"Aw, Johnny!" Anse looked down at the ground.

Sorry for the irony, Johnny said, "Forget it. That bill for snaps and buckles. How much is it?"

"What's your hurry?" Anse frowned. "It's not the end of the month."

"You'd better take it now. I'd hate to see you lose money on me, Anse."

Worden shook his grizzled head, fished out a chew of tobacco from his pouch and stowed the cud away. He said in a low rumble, "He's makin' his brags, kid, tellin' the town how you'll run like a yellow dog with your tail between your legs." He waited; then, "Don't let that dirty gunslick bluff you, Johnny."

Johnny took a pair of bills from his pocket and laid them on the anvil. "That'll cover the bill," he said.

Anse waited a moment, puzzled. "You understand?" he insisted. "He claims you used a sneak draw on the others. The boys are all hopped up, makin' bets."

"Are they?" Johnny drawled. "How do the odds lie?"

"Even."

Johnny rubbed his hand reflectively over his chin, then laughed shortly. "Well," he said drily, "anything's a good bet at even money." He turned away.

"Johnny," Anse called querulously after him, "you didn't get a receipt."

"Why would I need one?"

As Johnny came into the main street and headed north, he caught a glimpse of the clock in the barbershop. It was five o'clock. Shadows had started out from the stores toward the middle of the street, a darkly jagged tide of purple washing in over the day. Seeing this, Johnny's stride lengthened, for there wouldn't be much time with Janie.

Ahead of him a group of women whom he recognized as from the church saw him coming, whispered together, and then broke up with the sudden false purposefulness of avoidance. He remembered, then, that Janie had made another of her small gestures of propitiation to these women. She had sent some things for the bake sale tomorrow. Knowing how they would feel toward Janie and him, now, he groaned inwardly. Lost, all lost, every inch of ground they had gained toward respectability.

Frank's saloon came up before him, and abruptly he turned in. The old barkeep looked sharply at his face, then went back to polishing the stubby double-barrel shotgun that he kept under the bar.

"Frank," Johnny said in a pressing voice, "what do you do when you've made a big mistake and are honestly

sorry, and it catches up with you? Can't a good record wipe out a part of the bad?"

"No," said Frank firmly. "One way or another, you pay up. You can't dodge it, and you shouldn't."

After a moment Johnny said meekly, "I was thinking of Janie. It's rough on her."

"Didn't you think of that before?" Frank went on polishing the shining barrels.

Johnny *had* thought of it before, but he knew that he had changed; the man he had been was dead. Why couldn't that be enough? Would no one understand that the real Johnny Battle was the saddle maker, the man who went to church and paid his bills. A sudden wave of resentment tore loose inside him, and he slammed his fist down upon the bar.

"Frank, I'm no killer! I've had to kill or be killed ever since the Sioux scalped my folks up on the Missouri. I was ten, then, Frank! I never asked for that kind of a life."

"You took it," Frank said quietly. "And you stayed with it." He shook his head. "You rode with some bad hombres, kid. Johnny Good-by was as real as Johnny Battle."

THE anger left Johnny. It was true. He remembered, now, the night in Dodge when he had thrown in with Bode Drayton's bunch. He hadn't asked for that, either. But Drayton had said, "What can you lose, kid?" and there'd been nothing more to lose—then.

"Yes," he said, turning slowly from the bar, "I took it. So now I pay the bill—to a killer who wears the star." He waited, then blurted out, "Why don't they get rid of *him?* They're all afraid of him—I found that out."

"Ah," said Frank. He laid the gun down on the bar. "Listen, Johnny," he said. "It's like having a bear by the tail: you can't hold on and you can't let go. North of the honky-tonks the solid values of this place begin; down below here—well, you know what it is. The town is neither good nor bad, and Cresson keeps it that way. And the people are afraid of what they've got, and can't get what they want."

"I know what they want," Johnny said softly. "It's the same thing I want."

Frank looked at him pityingly. He had known a lot of homeless, lonely kids who drifted endlessly down the trails of the badlands, looking for something they couldn't see or even define, running away from what was inside them. Some were tough clean through, and others were just lost and groping, caught in a web of the things they'd done before they really knew.

"I understand, kid," he said gently. "But you're a lot like the town: a little black and a little white. When Cresson found you out, these people saw in you what they saw in the town, and they were confused in the same way: good or bad, they're not sure which." His voice fell low. "The same goes for Janie. She's a good woman, but they don't *know* it, because she works in a dance hall—" He stopped.

It came to Johnny that Frank was right. It had been a dream that he had no right to, because it was built on the lie that he had been living. But Janie had a right to it; it came from the very honesty that was herself. That was what hurt—she'd have to suffer because he had tricked her.

He turned to face Frank again. He didn't look like a kid, now, as he said regretfully, "I wish I'd talked to you like this a long time ago."

The old barkeep smiled. "Never too late, Johnny." He watched Johnny closely as he turned and went out of the bar.

Johnny angled north across the street, let himself into the shop and went directly to his rooms in the rear. When he opened the door, he stopped short as Janie rose quickly from a chair and faced him.

Janie's eyes, as dark as her midnight hair, held fear, and he had put it there. He saw the drained whiteness of the small, even features, and he thought: Forty years. Forty years—with her! Then he swallowed the anguish and said wearily, "You know— about me?"

She nodded, and suddenly the waiting broke and she was clinging to him, holding him tight. "I don't care! Nothing matters but us! The future, Johnny—

the future is all that counts."

The smell of her hair, the feel of her body next to him, moved him powerfully. For a moment he was tempted to rush into the street, guns blazing, and settle this thing, and then his wild irrationality passed. He held her away at arm's length, looking at her.

"We've got to hurry. There's still time to make it out of here before he comes. We'll find another town, some place where they don't know us."

"No!" The vehemence of it shocked him. She shook her head, her mouth drawn firm. "That's not the answer. They didn't know you here, either. Not even *I* knew you."

Ashamedly, he admitted that she was right. Wherever he went, Johnny Good-By would follow, sooner or later. There was no way, nothing he could do. He let her arms go and turned toward the cupboard. "It was all my fault," he muttered. "I've got us into something that I can't get out of. I shouldn't have brought this to *you*."

He took down the gun belt and twin holsters, and without looking at her, began to buckle them on. Janie saw and understood, and then stepped quickly forward.

"Don't put those on," she said sharply. "If you do, it's all over for us. You'll kill him. Then you'll be hunted again —an outlaw. Give them to me!" She held out her hand.

Johnny hesitated, looking at her, and then at the gun belt. "I *am* an outlaw," he said harshly. "The marshal of this town is coming up the street pretty soon to run me out."

"Are you going to let him?"

"Should I let him kill me? Is that any better? You won't go away with me. You don't want me to stay and fight."

"I didn't say that," she retorted. "Give me those guns."

JOHNNY would have resisted, but something in her gaze commanded, and he let her take them. She hung them over a chair back and faced him.

"Have you forgotten what we planned to do?" she asked in a low, quick voice. "How we were going to be somebody? Do you want to run from the law all your life Johnny, do you?"

"You know," he groaned. "You know! Why dog me like this?"

"Because I have to. Johnny, listen to me." Her hand touched his arm, and his gaze met hers. "My dad was a drunkard, a sod-hut farmer who failed. We never had enough to eat, and because he ran away from his troubles to a bottle. My mother died and we kids just went wherever we could. But I learned this, Johnny: you can't solve anything by running from it."

Johnny writhed. "I know that. I don't want to run from it. But what do you do when you can't either run or fight it?"

"You and I are two of a kind," Janie pressed on implacably. "You had nobody, either. You grew up in saloons and cow camps and then you hit the owlhoot trail. What did it get you? Nothing. You got sick of it. But here in this town we found what we wanted—each other and a chance to live right. Johnny," her voice fell low, "are we going to give it up and go back to the other way? Or are we going to stay here and fight for it?"

"Fight!" he said wretchedly. "It's a fight we've lost. From now on, we'd be just a gunman and his dance hall girl. Have you forgotten that?"

Instantly he regretted it. But after a moment she said in an altered voice, "No, I never will. I'll remember, and when I feel like quitting, I'll come back for more, and more, until they accept us."

The mantel clock in the next room struck once, catching and holding their attention. They waited the full six strokes, and when there were no more, he looked at her and said wearily, "Well, it's too late now."

Janie started to speak, but a knock on the door brought her frightened glance around to him. His hand went out to the holster on the chair back, and then he nodded. She went to the door and opened. A Mexican boy stood there with a cloth-covered tray.

"The boy said with a grin, 'The *senoras* from the church say *muchas gracias, senorita,* but they do not need these at the social'."

Janie stood there, staring numbly at

the kid. Finally, "They—sent them back?"

"*Si, senorita.*" He shoved the tray toward her, and presently she took it and the boy closed the door and went away.

For a long time Janie stood looking at the tray in her hands, and when she turned there were tears in her eyes. She started to speak, looked at the tray again, and her lip quivered.

"What is this?" Johnny asked.

"Pies, Johnny," she said in a small voice. "Just some pies I—I baked for the church social." She waited. Then, apologetically, "The ladies didn't really *ask* me to send them."

She stood there, humiliated, and somehow dearer to him than she had ever been, for he knew how much of her pride had been submerged in this gesture. It came to him that she had no false pride at all where their future was concerned. She would fight for it with all her woman's wile and tenacity, and with her belief in the necessary goodness of it. Looking at her, a lump came up in Johnny's throat and he felt his eyes smarting, and it suddenly appeared clear to him who the enemy was in this fight: the thing which could make Janie stand here, crumpled inside, yet smiling and asking for more. Frank's words ran from nowhere into his mind: "You're a lot like the town, a little black and a little white. Good or bad, they're not sure which. The same goes for Janie." Then, like the last piece in a puzzle, Brand Cresson's voice rang out in the street and Johnny's thoughts meshed, and he knew what to do.

"Come out, Good-By. Come out or I'll come in after you!"

He looked at Janie, gripped her arm hard, and then went at a run through the house and into the alley in back. Janie watched him go. Afterward she put the tray on the table and sat staring vacantly at nothing. It was a long while before she realized that she was staring at his guns, still on the back of the chair. She began to weep, softly.

Johnny crossed the street unobserved at the alleyway above Cresson, whose attention was riveted on the shop's front door. In a matter of seconds he was at the rear of Frank's saloon. As he came down the bar Frank looked up, surprised, and Johnny said, "Give me your greener, Frank."

"*What?*"

"Hurry up. Give me that double-barrel."

WONDERING, Frank pulled the shotgun from under the bar. Johnny took it and went toward the door. Some men near the window made a move, and he waved the barrel toward them. "Stay where you are." They moved back.

At the door, he heard Cresson curse, and then the marshal's voice lifted again through the street. "Good-by! For the last time, come out of there." In the moment of waiting that followed, Johnny pushed through the door and stepped to the plank walk.

The click of the double hammers going back was clear in the silence.

"Cresson!"

The marshal whirled, guns already half drawn, when he saw the barrels pointed at his middle and Johnny's cold eye looking down them. There they hung, while he weighed his chances, knowing that a hundred eyes were watching him.

"It would break you in two," Johnny warned him. "Don't try it."

For three long seconds Cresson calculated the odds, then he rejected them. His guns slid back into the leather, and his hands wavered away from them.

"Put 'em up." Johnny came down off the walk, and then Cresson's hands raised. Holding the shotgun in one hand, Johnny lifted the marshal's guns and tossed them away into the dust. Then he stepped back, as Cresson growled, "What's the big idea?"

Men had come from the houses and stores, now, down into the dust, forming a ring about them. Walton was there, his chunky face reddened by some inner excitement, and Doc Trumball, watchful and sardonic; Anse Worden, Jim Reeves—most of those who mattered. In their sober mien, Johnny saw that they were waiting, holding their judgment fine and poised above him and the man facing him.

In this moment he knew that the real issue here was between the turbulent past, of which he had been a part, and

a different kind of future for the town and for Janie and himself as a part of it. Janie had made it that way, and he knew that, and knew that it was the only way worth while.

He turned and handed the shotgun to Frank, who stood on the edge of the crowd. Then he looked at Cresson, framing words for all these men here. "I've made my mistakes," he said. "They can't be undone. I'm willing to pay up, but I'm not going to run, or do another wrong thing to wipe out the others." A murmur of approval arose from the crowd, then subsided. He went on, "You want a fight, Cresson. But I want my chance to stay here in this town. All right, we'll fight so that one of us rides out of here with a whole skin."

Out of the surprised silence, Cresson growled, "Fists?"

"That's it. Loser gets out. The town keeps a marshal or a saddle-maker, no questions asked."

Cresson stared at him and was about to say something, but a man in the crowd shouted, "That's a fair deal. Leave it like that," and with the rising murmur of assent, the marshal looked back at Johnny, his glance hot and resentful. "It couldn't have been better, Good-by," he snarled.

Cresson was rangy and big, a veteran of many bar-room brawls. The odds favored him and he knew it, as he stepped confidently forward. The watchers studied the two men as they came in toward one another.

For a moment they circled, and then Johnny came in with a rush, swinging one at Cresson's head. The marshal took it on the shoulder and snapped his left into Johnny's middle and the watchers heard the hard grunt as Johnny backed away. "Fight, you yellow dog," Cresson taunted, following him.

Johnny came in again, planting two hard blows to the body. Cresson weaved away, and then from nowhere his fist exploded squarely on Johnny's mouth. It was disaster shooting down his spine, making his neck crack and his ears roar. He wobbled back and dropped to one knee, everything out of focus. Cresson swarmed in, hammering at his head.

Johnny fought off this attack with upraised arms, and as his head cleared he sprang up, hauling one up from the ground to Cresson's stomach. It brought the big man's guard down, and he whipped his right to the jaw, sending Cresson backwards off balance and bringing him to the ground.

The marshal lay there a moment, and when he rose to a sitting position, anger and surprise twisted his broad face. Johnny came in on him, but suddenly Cresson scrambled up and rushed forward, weaving and feinting. It hit Johnny with a sickening feeling that he had bitten off more than he could chew. Everything he possessed had been in that punch, and it had not slowed the marshal down.

Desperately, Johnny bored in, convinced that he must finish it quickly. Cresson beat off his rush, taking only body blows, and then he found an opening and sent a hammering right to Johnny's face that downed him as though his legs had been chopped from under him. He hit the ground and rolled over, coming to one knee. He shook his head, heard Cresson near him and got up. Cresson dropped him again, hard.

HE LAY there a long while in the dust, and Cresson stood looking at him with a half sneer and turned away. The eyes of the crowd were on Johnny, soberly, and it was very still. From afar off a man's voice came to Johnny through the thick blankets of pain, "He's game, but Cresson'll kill him."

With that, he rolled over and drew his knees up under him. After he had hung there a moment, he got up. The murmur from the crowd drew Cresson's attention and he stopped short, a strange look on his face as he saw Johnny rise. Muttering oaths, he stepped forward.

Johnny's eyes were almost closed, and his lips were puffed and bloody. But when he heard Cresson taunt him, "This way, Good-by," he swung in toward the sound and went forward. The looping right caught Johnny on the side of the head and he went down limber, skidding a little through the dust as he hit.

Cresson stepped purposefully after him, but a man said quickly, "No you don't. No boots."

Cresson raised an ugly face to the crowd, saw something there that sobered him, and said meanly, "To blazes with it! He's done for anyhow." Rubbing his knuckles, he turned away toward where his guns lay in the dust.

It seemed to Johnny that eternity came and went while he lay there, fighting to retain consciousness. He was aware of what went on, but everything seemed far away beyond seas rimmed with pain. It seemed strange, in his miasmatic flow of thought, to hear Janie's words, "When I feel like quitting, I'll go back for more, and more!" and then it seemed unreal to the onlookers as he raised his arms and slowly turned over.

"Look there!" a heavy voice rumbled. "He's gettin' up!" And he was: he braced his elbows and then began painfully to draw his knees up under him. When that was done he hung there, blood dripping from his face darkly into the dust. A wobbly try and then another, and he was on his feet, blinded and swaying, but carrying the fight back to Cresson. Only, now, Cresson stood yards away, strangely white-faced, and Johnny headed, unseeing, into the crowd.

A man muttered, "Not here," and turned him around. "Out there, kid," he said in a sick voice. Johnny hesitated, then came on, dragging his feet.

Maybe it was the sight of Johnny's bloody, chewed-up face; the apparent inability definitely to finish him with his fists; maybe it was resentment that he had not been allowed to do it *his* way that threw Cresson off balance. He stumbled, and fell.

With a hoarse bellow he reached for his gun, swung about on his hunkers and aimed. "You fool! I'll stop you this time for good—" he finished on a sharp cry of pain as Charley Walton's powerful hand closed on his wrist and twisted, throwing the gun into the dust.

Livid, Cresson lunged to his feet. "What do you think you're doing?" And then he stopped as he saw the look on Walton's face.

"Get out, Cresson," Walton said quietly. "Get out of town and don't come back."

Cresson's hot, disbelieving glance raked the crowd and swung back to Walton. "What is this? You mean that *I* go?"

"You heard the way he put it," Walton said firmly. "And the boys here all did. Loser to get out. Well—you lost!"

JOHNNY came out of it between grinding waves of pain against which he stiffened and between which he relaxed. After a while he heard Janie's soothing voice, and felt the hot compresses which she held to his battered face. He moved, trying to say something, and heard Doc Trumball tell him, "Lie still, Johnny. You'll be all right soon. I left something with Janie to take down the swelling."

He was thinking how it would be to make another start in another town, and wondering where that place would be, and if Janie would be with him. The thought of it was like a sickness in him, for he'd had faith in this place. He had decided that there wouldn't really be much chance for them anywhere, when he heard the door open and Charley Walton's voice greeting Janie and Doc. Then Walton was speaking to him.

"As between a couple of bad men, one reformed and the other still practicing," the banker said, "this town has chosen the former. Johnny, as soon as you're up, you take Cresson's star. You can still run the shop."

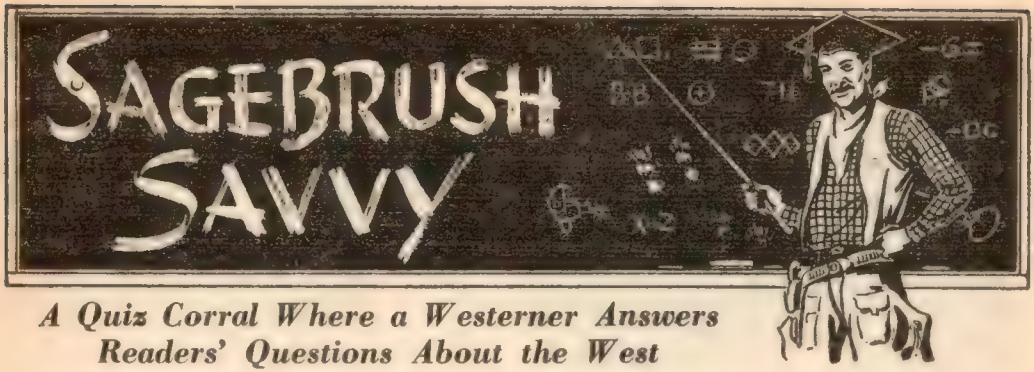
He heard Janie's exclamation, felt her hand squeezing his, as she said, "He'll make the best marshal in the world, Mr. Walton." And he had the odd feeling that he might be delirious.

But then Walton said, "We know he will. And speaking of good things, about those pies you baked, Miss Harding?"

There was a little silence. Then Janie murmured, "I—well, you see—"

"That was my chief reason for coming here," Walton said. "Wife's orders. She told me to tell you that she needs those pies, and would like to have them if you don't mind." He cleared his throat. "I'm supposed to bring them back with me. There was a slight mistake about that." Again he paused. "But it will not happen again."

Johnny Battle knew then that this was reality—the kind he and Janie wanted. All forty years of it.



A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Why are cowboy boot heels so high?—P.J.P. (Md.)

A.—High heels help the cowboy "dig in" for sure footing when holding a bronc roped afoot in a corral. Slanted as they are, they help hold his foot solid in the stirrup without danger of slipping through. The cowboy also likes them for style.

Q.—How much would I have to pay for a cowboy saddle?—F.L.M. (Ohio).

A.—$100 up to $250 for a cowboy saddle solid enough for cow work. You might get a comfortable riding western style saddle that won't hurt a horse's back with ordinary riding, for as low as $60, but don't tie onto any livestock with it—you might uproot the horn!

Q.—Sometimes in western stories I see where somebody is referred to as a "swamper". What does this mean?—Bill (N.Y.).

A.—Around cowranch and cowcamp the cook's helper, roustabout, or any general chore hand is often called a swamper.

Q.—What is the largest city in Texas?—J.D.W. (Miss.).

A.—Houston, with 384,514 people in 1940. I don't have the 1950 census figures, but Texans tell me it is growing so fast that taxi drivers run over jackrabbits every day that just haven't had time to get out of Houston's way.

Q.—About how big is a good, fat yearling beef steer?—Meat-eater (Wis.).

A.—Steers may be called yearlings at from 12 to 16 months of age and good ones of modern breeds weigh from 700 to 1,000 pounds.

Q.—I have made a bet with a friend that Bill Tilghman was not an oldtime western outlaw but a law officer. Who wins?—A.W.W (N. C.).

A.—You do. Bill Tilghman, one of the west's greatest gunfighting law officers, operated chiefly in what is now Oklahoma.

Q.—What is the right way to pronounce Rio Grande?—Ann L. (Mass.).

A.—Correct Spanish is REE-oh GRAHN-day. Common usage in the southwest is REE-oh GRAN-dy, but REE-oh GRAND and RYE-oh GRAND are a little too far off.

Q.—We think of "hoodlum" as meaning a gangster, but I read in western stories about the "hoodlum wagon" on cattle roundups and am not right sure what it means.—T.T. (N. Y.).

A.—When an extra wagon besides the chuckwagon is needed for hauling bedrolls and other gear, it is often called the hoodlum wagon.

Q.—Where does the turquoise in Indian made jewelry come from?—B. McC. (Iowa).

A.—I believe the principal turquoise mines from which most Indian craftsmen get their stones are in New Mexico, Utah and Nevada. There may also be such mines in Arizona. I'm not sure.

Q.—Are there any cowboys in California besides the Hollywood movie kind?—Josie (Mich.).

A.—You're darn tootin' there are! I don't have the figures on California as a beef raising state, but I know there are a mighty lot of cow ranches out there, and even under modern conditions raising beef means buckaroos.

—S. Omar Barker

RIDDLE of the WASTELANDS

By A. LESLIE

Vinton heard the spat of a bullet

There was no way across the burning desert for stolen cows, yet Rance Vinton was convinced that was the way they'd gone. . . .

UNCLE AB, I still think they run 'em to New Mexico."

Rance Vinton spoke earnestly. He leaned forward and tapped the table top with a bronzed finger.

Old Abner Shaw, owner of the Forked S ranch, snorted his disgust. He glowered at his young range boss.

"Rance, you're plumb loco," he declared. "Run cows across sixty miles of desert in July! Them cows go north to Oklahoma."

"Across the Canadian and over all the spreads and past the towns between here and there?"

"Can be done," retorted Shaw. "Any-

how, it's being done. We're losin' 'em, and so are other outfits and they've got to go somewhere. And it's sure for certain they don't cross the Tucumcari Desert. Sixty miles of sand and salt and alkali without a drop of water. A man on a horse takes his life in his hands if he tries to make that ride. No water, and a sand storm nigh every day. You can't travel in the daytime and a herd can't do sixty miles in one night, and you know it as well as I do. If they started 'em at night, they wouldn't be half across by morning, and before the day was out, every critter would be stretched out stiff. And they sure couldn't hole up somewhere all day without water and hope to make the drive. Nope, it couldn't be done, Rance."

"Maybe there's hidden water out there somewhere," Vinton suggested.

"Well," Shaw returned dryly, "I've lived in this section, boy and man, for nigh onto sixty-five years, and I never heard of any, and never knew anybody who did."

"I've been told the Indians used to cross the desert with their squaws and tipis, and take their herds of ponies along," Vinton remarked.

"Injuns know how to get along without water," said Shaw. "I've heard that yarn too, but I never knew an Injun who'd made the trip. You've been listening to the sheep-dip old coots pour out of bottles, Rance."

VINTON tried another tack. "I've heard that Captain Arlington of the Rangers, and some of his men, found water in the desert years back," he observed. "The Lost Lakes, I believe the springs were called. They said he got the tip from the Indians and went looking for them when he was chasing Indian raiders."

"Uh-huh, only the springs Arlington found weren't in the desert at all," said Shaw. "Arlington thought they were, but we know now that the springs were way over in New Mexico, beyond the desert, and to the north. Arlington and his men made the crossing in winter time and came darn nigh cashing in as it was. Nope, there's no water out there and you can count on it."

"We have it dry down in the lower Pecos country," said Vinton. "But if you look hard enough you can usually find a rock tinaja filled with rain water, or if you dig in a dry wash you can often get some."

"Yes, that's so, down there," Shaw replied. "Remember I lived down there for a while—that's how I come to know your dad—but the country there is different. There's a fine underground water system down there. All you need to do is sink an artesian well and you get a good head. That's limestone country. Up here it's different. There's an underground system here, but it's almighty deep. Have to dig down hundreds of feet to strike it. Oh, sure, I reckon it runs under the desert, too, but nobody's going to sink a well out there. Besides, it would fill up with sand in no time."

Vinton rolled a cigarette and lighted it, his gray eyes speculative.

"I'd sure like to give that desert a once-over," he said.

"You keep off that desert," Shaw ordered with decision. "It's a killer, especially at this time of the year. Get caught in a storm out there and you'll never see daylight again. You keep off it. I didn't talk your dad into letting you come up here to help me run the spread just to have you made into buzzard bait. You get busy building up that shipping herd tomorrow and forget about that blasted desert. And don't bother about the cows we lost, either. I'm handling that chore. While you were up to the north, I hired a feller to help out on it. A feller from over around Pampa. He's half Injun. Colonel Goodman told me he's just about the best tracker in Texas. He's on the job right now, huntin' the route those blasted wide-loopers use to run the critters north. There are ways to get north without being spotted. It's a chopped-up section from here to Oklahoma border and fellers who know it well know where to look for trails most folks don't know about. I'm countin' on Cado Pete, the feller I hired, to root

'em out. Then we'll land on them sidewinders like forty hen hawks on a settin' quail."

With which, old Abner nodded to his range boss and stumped off to bed.

Rance Vinton didn't go to bed. He sat in the big living room of the ranchhouse, smoking and pondering the problem that vexed the Forked S and other spreads in the section—the problem of how to hang onto their cows. For several months the section had been plagued by systematic looting that had assumed serious proportions. The rustlers were shrewd and adroit. Only two or three times had they resorted to the spectacular venture of running off a large guarded herd. Usually their method was to comb out small bunches—ten, thirty, fifty head—working at night, like shadows of the night, leaving behind no evidence of their operations except the highly irritating evidence of valuable stock missing.

Such methods, Vinton realized, were even more ruinous to the ranch owner than a sudden sweep against a shipping or trail herd. No owner could stand such a steady drain of his resources.

Only a few days before, old Abner Shaw, getting together a shipping herd, had sent his men to comb his southwest pasture, only to find said pasture had already been expertly combed, with more than a hundred prime beef cattle not present any more.

Shaw hit the ceiling. He swore he was going to do something. Bringing in the expert tracker was evidently the something he had in mind.

Time after time, posses had followed the trail of the wideloopers. Always it led west to the wastelands, then turned north, following the eastern edge of the desert. But soon the almost unceasing winds would fill the tracks with drifting sand and the wrathful cowboys were never able to pick it up again.

It was a shrewd outfit, all right, and a snake-blooded one. Each time a guarded herd had been raided, dead men shot down from ambush without being given a chance, remained as mute evidence of the callousness of the rustlers.

Rance Vinton knew the land to the north was wild and broken, ideal hole-in-the-wall country, but he still didn't believe that the wideloopers could run herd after herd past ranches and towns without sooner or later being spotted. But everybody, including Shaw, scoffed at the notion that the rustlers headed west for the good markets of New Mexico.

"Just couldn't be done," they declared.

Rance Vinton, comparatively new to the section and young enough not to have his opinions set in a conventional pattern, wasn't sure. But he was forced to admit he had nothing on which to base his hunch.

THE following day found Vinton busy superintending the chore of getting together the beef for shipping. But all the while he was pondering the mystery of the vanished herds. Toward evening he rode up the slope of the tall hills that flanked the desert on the west. Sitting his horse on the rimrock, he gazed across the wastelands.

It was indeed a desolate and ominous terrain. The desert was a vast sunken bowl, its floor a good two hundred feet lower than the rangeland. Far out to the west a sand storm was raging. Clouds of sand and dust particles swirled high in the sky to form an eerie yellowish curtain through which the sun shone like a bloody orange. The shifting veil continuously changed form and color and its sinuous motion seemed to hint at malevolent life.

Abruptly the wind lulled, ceased altogether, as was its habit at this time of the day. Within three minutes the dust and sand had settled and the air was crystal clear. Objects leaped into view with startling distinctness. Buttes and chimney rocks stood out hard and sharp-edged. Mountains in New Mexico, sixty miles distant, appeared almost within hand's reach.

Vinton suddenly became conscious of motion out on the desert floor, perhaps ten miles to the northwest. A black dot was bouncing toward the rangeland. Some distance behind it were other dots, five or

six of them. Vinton quickly realized that the dots were horsemen travelling at a fast pace.

"Now what in blazes?" he wondered. "Looks like a bunch of fellers chasing another one."

Even as he gazed, the wind rose again in fury. The yellow cloud climbed into the sky, writhed, thickened. Butte, chimney rock and speeding riders were blotted out as if they had never existed.

For some time Vinton continued to gaze westward, but the storm did not abate again and the sun was low in the western sky. Vinton shook his head and rode back down the slopes.

"Wonder just what was going out there on that flattened section of hell, and who was that feller leading the pack?" he asked his horse.

The horse didn't know, but Vinton had the question answered, to a certain extent, the following day.

Through the blue dusk of late evening, two old prospectors rode up to the Forked S ranchhouse. They led a mule across the back of which was draped the body of a man.

"Found him about five miles out on the desert and ten miles to the north of here," one announced. "Me and Hank was chippin' rocks at the edge of the desert and saw buzzards circlin' around and lighting. Figured we'd better take a look-see out there in case somebody had got hurt. Feller was hurt, all right—three bullet holes in his back. His dead horse was layin' alongside of him. It wore a Forked S burn, so we figured we'd better bring him here."

Old Ab Shaw took one look at the dead man, raised his clenched fists to the heavens and volleyed profanity.

"It's Cado Pete, the tracker I was tellin' you about last night," he said to Rance Vinton. "Now what in blazes happened anyhow? What was he doing out on that blasted desert?"

"I'd say," Vinton returned grimly, "he was as good a tracker as you said he was and he hit the trail of the wideloopers. From the looks of him, I reckon he found them."

"But what was he doing way out there?" asked Shaw and swore some more.

Vinton shrugged his broad shoulders and did not otherwise reply. But his mind recalled his fleeting vision of the day before, of a horseman speeding across the desert's dusty face with other horsemen racing in pursuit.

"And if that infernal wind hadn't kicked up again just when it did, I'd have seen it happen," he told himself. "Poor devil! Never had a chance."

Vinton led the prospectors to the kitchen for a meal while Shaw made arrangements for the disposal of the body and notification of the sheriff.

Vinton was composed when he entered the living room a little later, but his bronzed face was grimly set, and in his mind was a fixed resolve, Shaw's orders to the contrary. He sat silent and distrait while old Ab ranted and raved.

"That jigger was coming out of the west when I saw him," he mused. "Which means he'd ridden straight out into the desert. He found the trail, all right, and figured where it led to. Somehow or other he was spotted and ridden down. He was trying to get back when I saw him. Well, I'll take myself a little ride. I'm playing a hunch, and I'll bet a hatful of pesos it's a straight one. But it had better be, or I'm likely never to play another."

The Forked S ranchhouse was dark and quiet when Rance Vinton stole softly from his room, circled the bunk house and approached the stable where his big blue moros was stalled. He got the rig on the horse, stowed a large canteen filled to the brim with water in his saddle pouch, and after making sure his guns were in working order, also the heavy Winchester snugged in a saddleboot beneath his left thigh, rode swiftly across the rangeland.

IT WAS close to midnight when he reached the point at the desert's edge for which he had been heading. The day before, while watching the approaching horseman and his pursuers, he had mechanically noted the relation of certain landmarks to their position—a flat-topped

mountain across the New Mexico line, a strangely formed butte to the north, a jutting pinnacle soaring up from the eastern hills. Now, with only these shadowy markings, the lonely stars and the plainsman's uncanny sense of distance and direction for his guides, he rode west by north across the desert's face.

The desert was muted, the sharp edge of silence dulled only by the whisper of the sands stirred by the wind. The night was fairly cool, but the air was thick and heavy, with a strange sort of creamy feel to it. However, he made good progress and when the first rose streak of dawn quivered in the eastern sky, he estimated that he was far beyond where he had placed the galloping horsemen.

Slowly the light in the east strengthened. The trembling rose gave way to scarlet and crimson and gold. A spear of brilliance shot zenithward, was followed by another and another. A line of intense fire appeared over the edge of the world. Quickly it discovered a circular edge. With a flashing as of ten million lances the sun rose, flooding the desert with a mystic golden glow. It was day.

Vinton was a good twenty miles out on the desert now. The scene here was quite different from that farther south. On every hand rose dunes and buttes and chimney rocks. He seemed to be at the bottom of a vast circular bowl studded with strange upheavals.

"And that's just what it is," he mused. "A dry bowl that was once a great lake bed. Yes, no doubt of it. All this section was once under water, maybe a million years ago. Those buttes were once islands that rose above the surface of the lake. My job is to find out if there is any water out here. If there isn't, my whole hunch falls down. And me with it, the chances are. Blazes but it's getting hot. And here comes that damned wind, too."

It *was* hot. The rocky sides of the buttes and the glittering slopes of the dune reflected a withering blast. The rays of the sun were burning. The air was like that of a dry kiln. A shimmer hovered over the sands.

Vinton guided the moros into the shade afforded by a tall butte, pulled up and studied the forbidding terrain. He began a systematic combing of the vicinity. Nowhere did he find a drop of moisture. From time to time he dampened his lips with water from his canteen. Now and then he poured a small quantity into his hat, which the horse sucked up greedily.

"Feller," Vinton told him, "if we don't find something to drink besides what I've got in this darned jug, we aren't going to feel so good before it gets dark."

Hour after hour he rode aimlessly among the buttes and glowing rocks. Now and then he would pause beneath some overhang to rest the moros and somewhat recover his own strength.

East and west, north and south extended the billowy white sand, in low dunes, in winding ridges, in shimmering hollows. Under the beat of a gusty wind, thick clouds of dust tossed and swirled. Between the dust cloud swooped weird yellow shadows, coiling and twisting, writhing as if in torment. Only occasionally was the sun visible, a glaring red eye blinded almost instantly by the thickening dust.

Always the dust, the glowering shadows, the terrible heat that bewildered the brain, choked the throat, parched the lips and swelled the tongue of man and beast. This desert of western Texas was a frightful desolation haunted by the tortured spirits of its countless dead.

Heads bowed to the tearing wind and the burning dust, man and horse forged doggedly westward. The glaring sun was almost directly overhead before the erratic wind began to abate. Abruptly it ceased altogether, and Vinton was able to distinguish features of the terrain.

He found himself approaching a great ridge of yellow stone that, fanged and turreted, carved into weird shapes by the tireless fingers of rain, wind and sun, covered several acres. Slightly to the north of the ridge was a mound fully a hundred feet in height by perhaps five times that in length and a good three hundred feet in width. Its sides, sloping gently upward,

gleamed like a mirror in the sunshine.

AND in the shadow of the great ridge, he found the first indication of former human travel over the bleak desolation. Upright in the sand, where it was protected by the jutting and overhanging configuration of the cliffs, was the bleached shoulder blade of a giant buffalo, an enormous fan-shaped bone nearly sixteen inches long, twelve inches wide at one end and two inches at the other. On the smooth surface of this white blackboard of the Plains and the desert, were still faint tracings in yellow, red and green. They had been rendered illegible by the scouring of the sands throughout the years, but Slade knew they had once conveyed a message in the picture writing of the Indians.

"Somebody trying to tell somebody else something important," Vinton mused. "Wonder what it could have been? More evidence, anyhow, that hereabouts was a stopping point for Red Men crossing the desert. Why would they stop? The logical answer is, because here was water. But I sure don't see any now."

He rode slowly along the face of the ridge, which was cracked and fissured, working steadily to the north. Suddenly he drew rein. Splitting the face of the cliff was a dark opening some twenty feet in width by half that in height.

"A cave!"

Dismounting, he approached the opening, the moros ambling along behind him. Almost immediately he discovered signs of recent occupancy by men and horses. The horses had left plenty of marks of their tenancy, while over to one side was a crude fireplace built of smoke-blackened stones. Nearby was a stack of dry wood.

"Somebody made camp here, and not long ago, either," Vinton declared, examining the ashes in the fireplace. "Bet a hatful of pesos we'll find water in here."

They did, just a few minutes later. Selecting a dry branch, Vinton struck a match to one end. The wood burned with a clear flame, affording sufficient light by which to explore the cave. Vinton had hardly covered a dozen paces when a reflected gleam along the wall caught his eye. It came from a pool of water.

Vinton barked an exultant exclamation. "Why, this is too darn easy," he told the horse. "Why haven't folks stumbled on this before now?"

He got a grim explanation a moment later.

The moros plunged his nose into the pool, and as abruptly jerked it out again, shaking a shower of drops from his whiskers, snorting disgustedly.

"What's the matter with you?" Vinton growled, and scooped a handful of water and held it to his lips. Instantly he spat it out again, as disgustedly as had the horse.

The inviting water was bitterly salt!

Despite the blistering heat, Rance Vinton suddenly felt cold all over. He began to appreciate to the full old Ab Shaw's well-meant warning. His canteen was empty, had been for some time. Already his lips were cracking, his tongue beginning to blacken and protrude. He could feel the blood rushing through his veins, and a strange prickling of his skin.

"Must be another spring in here," he told the horse, hopefully. "We've got to find it."

They didn't. The shallow cave showed no other sign of water.

Vinton experienced a surge of panic. With an iron effort of will he got a grip on himself. He hurried from the cave and began a systematic examination of his surroundings.

But as he continued to explore the rifts and cliffs and the adjoining buttes and clumps of chimney rocks, he found not a trace of water. He halted in the shade of an overhang, rolled a cigarette and sat smoking and thinking. Suddenly he had an inspiration. Turning the moros, he rode swiftly back to where the bleached blade bone was stuck in the sand. He dismounted and carefully noted the direction the vane indicated. The blade pointed directly to the great mound just north of the ridge.

"It was a signboard, all right," he mut-

tered. "The Indians used the blade as a pointer."

Mounting again, he rode to the mound and slowly circled it. Nowhere was there a sign of water. He shook his head in disgust, running an eye up the gently sloping side. Abruptly he uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Damn foolishness," he muttered. "Who ever heard of water being found on the top of a hill?"

Just the same he toiled up the burning slope, leading the exhausted horse. He reached the crest and halted as if petrified.

The crest of the mound was hollow, forming an almost circular cup more than a hundred feet in diameter. The gently sloping side of the cup was scored by many hoof prints. At the bottom, about fifty feet below, gleamed a broad, silvery expanse.

BUT there was no exultation in Rance Vinton's heart as he stared downward. Instead, there was a return of the clammy feeling of cold he experienced in the cave. For the gleaming surface of the "pool" below consisted of smooth, hard-packed white sand.

"Reckon maybe it catches some water during a heavy rain," Vinton muttered dully. "But, blast it, those hellions don't wait for a rainstorm to do their wideloop-ing. There hadn't been any rain for two weeks when they combed our southwest pasture. Come on, horse, maybe there's a puddle down there somewhere we can't see from up here."

Hopelessly enough, he trudged down the slope. He reached the bottom and glared wildly about. Nowhere was there a hint of water. He stepped out onto the gleaming surface for a better look. The sand, he realized, was different from that of the desert. The edges of the grains were not sharp. They were smooth and rounded. Vinton picked up a handful of them and sifted them through his fingers, glancing about the while.

Suddenly his gaze fixed. Along the edge of the white sand was something green. It proved to be a multitude of tiny plants, fresh and healthy looking.

"And these things can't live without water, not in this heat," he muttered. "Say, where did I see this sort of stuff before?"

Abruptly he remembered and his bloodshot eyes blazed with excitement. He was recalling a shrewd and experienced old range boss down in the Pecos country. The range boss had rolled his herd up to the bank of a dry river bed.

"Bring up the remuda," the boss had ordered cheerfully. "Here's where we get everybody a drink."

Vinton visioned the remuda churning back and forth across the dry sands of the river bed while the hands watched expectantly.

"By gosh, it might work here!" he exclaimed. "May be the answer to the whole loco business. Come on, horse, we got work to do."

He led the horse to the center of the cup and began walking in a circle.

As boots and hoofs beat the surface of the sand, dust arose. But this soon ceased.

"We're doing it, feller," Vinton exclaimed. "The sand's getting damp."

The trudging feet beat out a shallow trench as the sand packed down. Soon the bottom of the trench was covered with a glassy film. Another ten minutes and they were sloshing through a couple of inches of water.

"See how it works?" exulted Vinton. The bottom of the cup was solid rock. When it rained, water seeped down through the sands but couldn't go past the rock. The covering sand held evaporation to practically nothing, so the cup filled almost to the surface with only a comparatively thin covering of sand on top of it. Their tramping beat down the sand into the water and forced the water to the surface. A herd of cows or a dozen horses would soon have had water all over. "Careful, now, or you're liable to put a hoof through. This stuff is just like quicksand. Okay, this'll do."

He let the horse drink as much as was safe. Then he drank all he dared himself

and filled his canteen to the brim. The water was slightly brackish but quite palatable.

"It won't stay up long," he mused, "but we know how to get more if we need it. Now I see how those hellions work it.

"They tie onto the cows and run 'em across the desert at night, when it's comparatively cool and when the wind usually has less strength. They hole 'em up here during the day, beat out water and rest 'em. Then they light out as soon as it is dark and make the drive to New Mexico. A hard drive, all right, but it can be done, with the cows well rested and full of water. Let's go back to that cave, where it's a mite cooler."

Leading the horse, he made his way back to the surface of the desert and proceeded to the opening in the ledge face. He hugged the ledge to escape the sun's rays as much as possible, reached the cave mouth and turned into it. With a catlike bound he went along the side wall, guns coming out. In the shadows inside the cave mouth he had sensed movement. At the same instant he heard the snort of a startled horse.

A lance of flame gushed from the shadows. The gunshot rang deafeningly between the cave walls. Vinton heard the spat of a bullet against the rock close to his head. He fired at the flash, again and again. Answering slugs stormed about him. The unseen horse snorted and squealed. There was a scrambling of boots on the stone floor, then a queer choking grunt and the thud of something falling.

VINTON sidled along the wall, thumbs hooked over the cocked hammers of his guns. He listened and peered. The cave was now silent, save for the uneasy movements of the frightened horse. He took a chance, stepped forward, ready for instant action. Nothing happened. He fumbled a match from his pocket and struck it. The tiny flame revealed a saddled and bridled horse standing near the far wall, and two loaded burros with heads hanging in hypocritical meekness.

[*Turn page*]

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On the floor lay the huddled body of a man.

The match flickered out. Vinton struck another, shot a swift glance at the motionless figure. He procured a dry branch from the wood pile and touched a match to its end.

The flame showed him that the man on the floor was satisfactorily dead. He was a stringy individual with a lean, rat-like face. Vinton ignored him for the moment and turned his attention to the nervous horse, which he soothed with words and hand. He examined the loads roped to the backs of the burros. They consisted of staple provisions and large canteens of water. He hesitated a moment, then removed the loads and stacked them against the wall. He got the rig off the horse. Then he rolled a cigarette, squatted on his heels and considered the situation.

"That jigger packing in all that chuck can mean just one thing," he decided. "The rest of the bunch aims to hole up here tomorrow. Which means they figure to pull something tonight. Could be our shipping herd. Could be something else. But I'm ready to bet my last peso that they'll land here with a bunch of cows about daylight tomorrow. Well, reckon it's up to me to get going. Sun's still hot, but I've got to chance it. Doesn't seem to be much wind blowing now. It'll be all I can do to get to the spread in time as it is. If they are figuring on lifting our herd, it'll be curtains for our night hawks if I don't get there in time.

"Smoky, I'll give you an hour to rest," he told the horse. "While you're at it, I'll just pack this punctured gent outside and hide him in some hole. Don't want the rest of the bunch to find him if they get here first."

It was long past dark when Vinton reached the Forked S ranchhouse. The night had turned stormy and a slow drizzle was falling.

"All the better for us," he muttered as he dismounted. He ran to the bunkhouse, slammed open the door and let out a yell that brought all hands from their bunks.

"Get your clothes on pronto and the

rigs on your horses!" he told the bewildered cowboys. "And be sure your guns are in working order. We got things to do. Clate, get my rig off Smoky and put it on the big bay. Give Smoky oats and turn him loose in the pasture. Move!"

He headed for the ranchhouse and roused up old Abner. In terse sentences he informed Hatch of his discovery.

"Hustle," he told the owner. "We've got to get to that herd before they do and warn the nighthawks, or they are all liable to be dead men before morning."

"Going to land on 'em when they come for the herd?" the swearing Hatch asked as he hustled into his clothes.

"No," Vinton replied, through a mouthful of sandwich and coffee. "We don't know for sure whether they're after our herd or somebody else's cows. We'll head straight across the desert to their hole-up and hit 'em there. That way we should drop a loop on the whole bunch."

In less than twenty minutes a grim troop rode swiftly across the rain-lashed prairie. As they neared the spot where the shipping herd was bedded down, Vinton heaved a sigh of relief.

"In time," he told Hatch. "I hear the boys singing to the cows. We'll grab 'em and hightail. If those sidewinders come for our cows and find 'em unguarded, they'll figure the boys snuk off somewhere to get out of the rain."

The sky to the east was graying and the storm blowing itself out when they sighted the great yellow ridge and the high mound. They approached cautiously through the gloom but saw nothing of movement. A few minutes later and they reached the cave.

"We won't go in there," Vinton said. "They might separate when they get here, some taking the cows up top to drink and others going into the cave to make camp. We'll hole up behind that clump of rocks over there. They command the cave mouth. There's nothing to do but wait."

THE WAIT proved tedious. An hour passed, and part of another. It was

[*Turn page*]

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almost sun-up and there was plenty of light when Vinton suddenly voiced a warning.

"Here they come," he said. "Look, over there to the left, and they're driving cows. About eight of the devils. We've got to get the jump on them. Those are our cows, all right."

Forward rolled the tired and thirsty cows, the owlhoots urging them on and glancing apprehensively at the brightening sky. The herd surged up to the ledge, bleating and bawling. As Vinton predicted, several of the riders immediately turned the leaders and shoved them up the slope. Four men rode with the herd. The others dismounted and entered the cave. Their voices were heard calling a name. Swearing followed. Then a light flared up and soon a fire was crackling and snapping just inside the entrance.

"Haven't gotten suspicious because the hellion I downed isn't around," Vinton breathed to Hatch. "We've got to wait till the other four come down off the hill. Got to get 'em all together."

Another tedious wait followed. The aroma of cooking meat and boiling coffee drifted from the cave mouth. The light strengthened and the wideloopers could be seen moving about just inside the cave.

"Easy," Vinton told the nervous and impatient cowboys. "It'll take time to beat up enough water for that herd.

Finally the four men came sliding down the slope of the hillock. They entered the cave and grouped around the fire, talking with the others. Rough laughter sounded.

"Okay," Vinton whispered to his men. "Circle around through the rocks and slide along against the ledge. Then right inside, guns ready. They won't be taken without a shooting."

Swiftly and silently the hands obeyed. They reached the cave mouth without being discovered by the wideloopers, who were clumped together near the entrance, eating. The first intimation they had that anybody was within forty miles of them was Rance Vinton's ringing command:

"Elevate! You're covered."

For an instant there was paralyzed si-

lence. Then a man let out a frightened yell and went for his gun.

Vinton shot him before he could clear leather. The cave rocked and echoed to the roar of six-shooters.

Shooting with both hands, Vinton charged forward. A bullet scored a red streak along the side of his neck. Another grazed his forearm. His guns boomed and he saw a man reel and fall. His companions, fanning out on either side, were shooting as fast as they could pull trigger.

In a moment it was all over. Five men were down. Three others had their hands in the air and were howling for mercy. Watchful and alert, the Slash K punchers moved forward and secured their sullen prisoners. One of the hands had suffered a punctured arm. Another was stanching blood from his bullet-drilled shoulder. Old Abner Hatch mopped a gashed cheek.

"But nobody hurt bad," he whooped cheerfully. "Say, is the sheriff going to be flabbergasted when we bring this bunch of hellions in! Rance, you've sure done this section a prime favor. Well, we'll patch the boys up and then eat. Plenty of good chuck lying around. No sense lettin' it go to waste. Reckon we can't start back till dark, anyhow."

Rance Vinton was looking thoughtful. "Boss," he said, "I've a notion finding out about this water here will open up a nice new reservation market over in New Mexico. Fact is, I suggest we let half the boys take the prisoners back to town tonight while the rest of us run the herd on across to New Mexico. What you think?"

"I think it's a darn good notion," said Hatch. "And," he added with a chuckle, "I've a notion you're the first honest jigger since the Injuns who has ever figured a way to make this blasted desert show a profit."

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